Commencer Par La Faim

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Commencer Par La Faim

by Shachaai

Summary

Though he doesn't particularly *like* the beta, for many reasons, sleeping with Dr. Hannibal Lecter had seemed like a good idea to Will at the time - not least of all that doing so prevented Lecter from ethically providing analysis of him to the FBI.
But then, somehow, it seems that Hannibal can actually understand the way Will thinks, and that, in a world of madness, gore and shockingly beautiful murder, Will might have actually found a true friend. Whom he is still painfully attracted to despite all their differences, despite society and everyone telling them they're unsuited for each other, and who still seems to be deeply attracted to him.
Discovering he's pregnant just complicates matters, because that's just what Will needs when he's already got murderers to catch, a demanding boss to appease, a surrogate daughter to defend and a brain on fire. *Complications.*

[A Season 1 AU: loosely follows events after *Apéritif,* with a large omegaverse jump to the left.]

chaud-froid

Chapter Notes

All my plans for SummerSlick fell to the wayside because *this* ate my brain instead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Un bon repas doit commencer par la faim.

Going to bed with Dr. Hannibal Lecter is either one of the best or worst decisions that Will Graham has made in the past few years of his life, and only time will tell which way the coin lands after the flipping. Bright-eyed corvids can't help themselves when it comes to something new and shiny, and impulse decisions about Hannibal Lecter, Will is finding ever more rapidly, are a shiny, *shiny* dime a dozen.

So sex. Because another chance meeting with Lecter in Abigail Hobbs' hospital room during Will's mandatory post-incident leave from work had turned to conversation again, the snap-*click* of words falling into place like a jigsaw which Will hadn't realised could be assembled by two. A shared understanding there and growing, in that sad little room, between like minds that had run the same gauntlet of fire, between two pairs of hands dipped and meeting in the depths of a blood-red sea.

Abigail, face and hands uplifted like the drowned Ophelia, had laid there on the bed beside them in her medically-induced coma, and the monitors around her had beeped steady recrimination direct to all who'd listen.

Partly as a distraction from it, Will thinks, Lecter had invited Will to a late lunch. At his home. Stopped Will with a touch to make the offer, the intimate shock of skin unexpectedly meeting skin. Lecter's hand had been light atop Will's wrist but his gaze, when Will had accidentally, distractedly, looked up underneath his lashes and caught it, had been harsh-electric, fish-hooking Will hard in the gut with the fat dark blooming of his pupil.

A biological response: beta. Will hadn't been made uncomfortable by it.

"You're not hungry for *food,*" Will had blurted out before his brain had caught up with him. An accusation.

"...No," Lecter had agreed, and the drag of his thumb over the back of Will's hand had made Will shudder, made Will's omega scent grow thick around them both and sweeter. Smoky-sweet woodspice. Lecter's gaze had turned devastatingly, promisingly, darker, and there had been no looking away from him then, no oasis for the sudden desert of Will's mouth. "But I believe myself to be more than capable of sating any of your appetites."

So pretentious, still. So self-assured, to the point of arrogance. To the point- Will's mind is still explaining to the rest of him why he had chosen to take Lecter up on his offer. Why he had followed Lecter in his own beat-up car to Lecter's ridiculously fancy house in Chandler Square, let the good doctor take his hand, take Will upstairs to his *ridiculously* fancy bedroom, spread Will out on his stupidly, *ridiculously fancy* bed, and proceed to fuck Will to two gasping, blinding and *excruciatingly* glorious orgasms.

No lunch though. Yet.

Will can't even use the lazy person's excuse of alpha pheromones overwhelming him. Lecter is a beta - though he smells good enough to attract anyone he pleases, whatever their sex or gender. The sheets now twisted around Will's waist on the bed - the finest of Egyptian cotton if Will had to stake his life on it, pre-washed to luxurious softness - smell of a mixture of sex and a dry, delectably spicy silveriness that makes Will trickle with slick when he shamelessly burrows his nose into it despite the fact he is two weeks past his last heat *and* blissfully fucked-out. Wrapped all around and beneath it is a warm and creamy *deepness* Will can't describe except he knows he licked it from the wet hollow of Lecter's throat as Lecter fucked him, his teeth dragging over taut flesh in lieu of biting down. The blended scent is good - it is deeply, possessively, wantonly so *good* -, and Will had purred as it had filled his mouth and nose, dragged over his tongue, as the scent had caught him and drowned him in its thick and golden river as Lecter's hot bare skin and sweat had rubbed it into Will's skin all over.

Idiots can rhapsodise about knots being the only *real* way to please an omega in bed all they like, getting a 'wet bitch stuck good' and drunk on endorphins on their knot for ages at a time. As a beta, Lecter has no knot to speak of and Will is happy as a pig in *shit* in the good doctor's bed, wrung to blissful post-coital exhaustion and a little high just on the *smell* of the other man.

It is, most likely, Lecter's hideously expensive cologne. *God,* it should be illegal for anyone to smell that good.

Though they'd both dozed off after the second round, belly-down beside each other, Will is reasonably sure Lecter is now, if not entirely awake, definitely conscious enough to notice if Will does anything more than minutely stretch, so Will restrains himself from reaching back and down to finger himself where he is still tender, open, though the scent of Lecter's bed - the scent of them both *in* Lecter's bed - and the heat simmering slow in Will's belly certainly makes him want to. It wouldn't take much. Lecter had used condoms but Will is still wet and dripping slowly with his own slick - unusually, embarrassingly, copious this afternoon - and lube, his ass and balls and the skin between his thighs growing tacky where the air is beginning to dry them.

Will's cock is beginning to stir with interest again, pressed between his belly and the mattress, and he wriggles slightly to try and get comfortable. Instead, he almost jumps out of his skin when *something* skims airy as a moth down his spine - Lecter's hand, as it turns out, the beta huffing out a laugh when Will turns startled eyes on him, instinctively tipping towards Lecter on the bed.

"My apologies," says Lecter. Doesn't sound terribly apologetic as his fingertips ignore the space between them and ticklishly trace the curve of Will's uplifted shoulder. His fringe is

incorrigibly little-boy soft as it sweeps over his eyes and onto the pillow, the strands gold and brown and ash in the afternoon sunlight. “You reminded me so much of the Louvre’s *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* in your repose, I had to be sure you were still a creature of flesh rather than marble.”

Right. Will’s eyes narrow. “I bet you say that to all the notches on your bedpost.”

“Only when it’s true.” Lecter, Will is quickly learning and reconfirming (as if he could have missed the beta using and abusing the conventions of politeness by showing up on someone’s motel doorstep with a home-cooked breakfast to all but demand both entry and conversation in exchange), is shameless. “The Masters would have wept for the chance to use you as their model.”

“I make a poor model,” Will says flatly. For all branches of study.

Learning the ropes from his father in the boatyards as a young male omega, Will had been dealt more than his fair share of lines from the rich whose boats the Grahams had been working on. Leering eyes and lewd comments had always gotten dressed up real pretty at first by the entitled, wealthy alphas who had been raised to think the sun came up in the mornings just to hear them crow, and all of them had been heavy with the honey and the big long words that were supposed to impress poor little Will Graham with all the luxury and education that were realms beyond his grasp. Have him positively *swooning* into an ardent lech’s bed, tripping all over himself that one of his - supposed - social betters deigned to spare him a few moments of their time.

(What was a pretty little thing like him doing getting his even prettier little hands all dirty with the innards of a boat engine for? Will should come up on deck, on the marina pier, for a moment or two, have a little drink on his employer's tab - no, sweet thing, they won't tell his daddy, not for something as small and meaningless as a *little* drink. Look at those pretty curls of his, his rosy cheeks, getting all sweat-slicked in the sun. Will should come sit a while in the shade, right by the alpha's knee, get shown something more fun to get bent over than an engine rusting over with grease.)

However they’d put it, it had all meant the same in the end: the rich thought they could buy the body of the boy who worked on their boats just as easily as they bought his and his father’s time and labour. None of them had been too happy to find that all their wealth, all their insincere words and wooing, got them exactly *nowhere* with Will, the omega boy with a mind and tongue as sharp as his face and coltish figure had been thought pretty, and more than a few had retaliated by making sure that work in that area had mysteriously dried up overnight, forcing the Grahams to move on to pastures new to find the next paycheque.

Down - the pads of Lecter’s fingers follow the line of Will’s collarbone down, slow as a man testing the keenness along the length of a blade. “You’ve never modelled for me.”

Will can feel his eyebrows rising. “*You* are not a Master.”

“I won an internship at John Hopkins because of my anatomical drawings.”

“Of course you did,” says Will, and rolls away from Lecter so he can flop on his back and look at the dark blue ceiling, hands folded over his stomach. The move has the added benefit of giving him a *reason* for not meeting Lecter’s eyes (rather than simply seeming very invested in the other man’s forehead), though Lecter’s hand follows him down and spreads warm heat high on his sternum, his wrist pressed incidentally to Will’s skin in a lazy, beta-weak but inevitable, scent-mark. “Well done. Still doesn’t mean you get to sculpt my ass out of marble.”

“We could start with clay,” Lecter suggests, sounding amused by Will's stubbornness, and pursues like the relentless bastard he is, propping himself up on his elbow beside Will and pressing their bodies close again. He is so *long,* all over, the breadth of his shoulders blocking out Will’s line of sight to the door. He hadn't seemed so long in his suit, but here? Naked? Lecter is one long leonine stretch of heat.

“So you can go all *Ghost* on me? No thanks.”

“Sketches in graphite then, to immortalise your beauty.” Will isn’t going to look at Lecter. He isn’t. He can *feel* the bastard grinning at the corner of his eye, surprisingly crooked fangs flashing behind that smile. “You, languorous, like this, the lights turned low to shadows and diamonds sparkling around your neck.” Lecter’s touch slides higher again, the v between forefinger and thumb hooking possessively under the bob of Will’s throat. Pushing *just enough* against resistance for Will to feel it. “Your head tipped back, lips parted on a sigh..."

Will swallows under the weight of that hand, of Lecter’s vision, his lips parting reflexively and pulse beating loud in his ears.

“I want you to draw me like one of your French girls.”

Will chokes. He isn’t sure himself if it’s from laughter or outrage but his expression must be a wonder, because Lecter’s chest rumbles with mirth beside him. The sound reverberates from him to Will in all the places they touch, resonating through Will’s blood and bones and all but demanding an answering bark of laughter from him. A convulsion.

Lecter grips his chin and turns Will’s face towards him to steal the sound before Will has finished laughing, smile against smile and Will’s stomach flipping itself over as Lecter pushes his tongue into Will’s mouth. Will moans, deep and rough, and one of his hands flies to Lecter’s nape to grip at the fine mussed strands of Lecter’s hair as the other man kisses him slow and thorough, drawing back only when they need to breathe.

He doesn’t go far, noticeably half-hard against Will’s thigh and his hot breaths still spilling over Will’s lips. His gaze, a deep maroon in shadow, stays set in its study of Will’s face.

Will pants in reply, every ragged breath drawing more of the scent of Lecter’s silvery, spicy cologne into his lungs, his eyes barely open and his hand still woven thoughtlessly in Lecter’s hair. God, Lecter isn’t the only one whose prick is still interested, Will’s well on its way to full mast and smearing sticky wetness across his hip. “...I didn’t figure you for a *Titanic* fan.”

“Were we only able to reference those things with artistic merit, we would have very few topics to discuss between us at all.”

The corners of Lecter's eyes crinkle, half a beat too slow, when Will laughs again. It's only an escaped huff of air, but it's enough.

Will can't remember the last bedpartner of his who made him laugh so much - hell, he can't remember the last *person* who made him laugh so much, whether they fucked or not -, but he can't shake off the vague feeling that Lecter is... *experimenting* with him.

Nothing so banal as experimenting with his own sexuality - Lecter had seemed damn comfortable with reducing Will to all but begging before he'd fucked him open with his cock -, but trying different social approaches with Will: shifting through shades of horny, romantic, funny, and intellectual. Trialling different methods of interaction to find out what does and doesn't stick.

Lecter's pushing, like he'd pushed in Jack's office, like they hadn't, since then, held a dying girl's neck together with nothing but their bloody hands.

The way Lecter is conducting his examination - that he's even conducting an examination *at all* right now - suggests a calculated, emotional withdrawal from the situation that rankles Will by steadily increasing increments. Will has never enjoyed being some psychiatrist's guinea-pig, least of all in the *bedroom,* but it's especially insulting because, *damn him,* Lecter is doing it well. Will might be annoyed but he's charmed by many of the facets of Lecter's personality being shown to him despite himself - and still aroused, letting out a slow breath when Lecter dips his head again to press slow open-mouthed kisses under his jaw.

Curious how things can work on you even when you recognise them.

Will shifts slightly, flushing pink up from his collarbones when he only realises afterwards that he has instinctively tipped his head to give Lecter more room to kiss his throat, offering up the throb of his scent gland where his shoulder meets his neck. It doesn't inspire him to kindness.

"...Right now I'm sympathising less with Rose and more with the iceberg. *You* can be the ship."

Lecter's chuckle has teeth, pressed light to the tendons of Will's neck but scraping enough to make him shiver. "Are we destined for a collision?"

"You're destined to get a new hole ripped out of you if you keep this heading," Will warns him.

That causes Lecter to pause, lifting his head. He looks, Will is annoyed to note, possibly even *more* fascinated than before, a cat watching a bird on the other side of a window. "What a delightfully vicious creature you are."

"Masochist."

"Hedonist," Lecter corrects him, and his smile gleams like a particularly pleased wolf's. Post-grandma. "I choose to embrace *all* of life's sensations, however they may present themselves."

*"Sado*masochist," Will graciously amends, and leans upwards to bite that smile, dragging Lecter's lower lip between his fangs.

The noise Lecter makes into his mouth at that is filthy, and his hips thrust once, instinctively, against Will's thigh. *Please.* Yes.

Will's free hand grips at Lecter's shoulder for leverage, down over the curve of his back, only for his palm to slip through something thick and faintly tacky. When he lifts his hand again to stare at it in confusion, kiss broken, it comes back marked with red.

"...The fuck?"

"Ah," says Lecter, "they appear to be bleeding again."

"'They'?" Will demands, so Lecter sits up beside him on the bed, twisting to show Will the smooth golden line of his back.

Red scratches, still beading with fresh blood, mar Lecter's shoulder blades, a set of four distinct lines on either side of his spine. They are deepest at their base, growing lighter as they branch out to Lecter's shoulders and eventually turning to raised welts.

"Did I-?" Will starts before he catches himself. *Stupid question.* When he brings his hand closer to his eyes, he can see dried blood under his nails. Claws. "Christ. Sorry."

"No apology is necessary." Lecter has the indecency to look terribly smug about his wounds, the twist of his mouth barely hidden by his shoulder when he looks back over it at Will. "One might almost consider them the sign of a job well done."

One can go and fuck himself, in Will's humble opinion, if one is so determined to bask in his own arrogance.

Will sits up, tucking his heels in to rest cross-legged. "This was a terrible idea."

"Is that so?" asks Lecter. Mildly. His gaze flickers down at Will's lap - and Will's hard-on, which has defiantly missed the memo that Will is too annoyed to fuck Lecter now. On principle. Again. "You do not appear to be entirely convinced."

Will colours, and grabs for the nearest loose sheet to haul over his waist.

"Some hesitance is to be expected," Lecter continues blithely, turning around on the bed again. He's absolutely shameless in his own nakedness - and really, Will grudgingly concedes, trying - and failing - not to ogle anew at Lecter's miles of toned gold skin, he has nothing to be ashamed *about.* The psychiatrist had been hiding some serious musculature under his weirdly-patterned suits, his chest furred with ashy silver and his gorgeously broad shoulders tapering to a sinfully sharp waist. His cock, thick and dusky red with blood, still beading pearly wetness at its tip, is *made* for riding, flushing darker when Will's gaze drops to it and twitching upwards to Lecter's belly. "I cannot recall the last time that I leapt so suddenly into an affair."

“This is not an *affair,*” Will snaps, driven both by irritation at Lecter and irritation at himself because he can’t get his own cock under control and his ass is *still* dribbling slick onto the mattress. The box of beta condoms, some part of his brain unhelpfully reminds him, is still sitting within reach on the bedside cabinet. “Hell, it’s barely a one-night stand.” Corrects himself - “One-afternoon stand.”

“...I see.” Lecter’s voice sheds the warmth of its mirth and turns cool, a coldness one cotton sheet does nothing to protect Will from. There lies the injured ego. “Are you prone to one-afternoon stands, Will, or was I the exception chosen so that I could no longer ethically psychoanalyse you in an official capacity?”

“Well,” says Will. That answer feels *something* like the truth, something close to an explanation for Will’s motives in going to bed with Lecter - even if it isn’t the full story. Lecter is probably owed a little of the truth, despite his probing manipulations. For Abigail. “You’re not the first.”

“One-afternoon stand, or therapist you’ve bedded to avoid further scrutiny? ...Not just therapists,” Lecter realises slowly, even as he asks the question. One eyebrow arches, and Will cannot tell if the man is impressed or not when he breathes, “My, my, Professor Graham. Such devious methods for one trusted with instructing the bright young hopefuls of the FBI.”

Will won't be shamed for using people to wound their own chances to use *him.* “The supreme art is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

“The Art of War.” Lecter tips his head just barely, just *so*, a thoughtful, almost alien, cant that sets a thrum of warning bells thrilling through Will’s nerves. This man - “With your kind of calculation, perhaps Machiavelli might be a better fit for your machinations than Sun Tzu? *Non tentare mai di vincere con la forza ciò che può essere vinta con l'inganno.”*

Will waits, crumpling the sheet in his lap with two fists. He should be getting out of the bed now. He should. Lecter is far too savvy for comfort, sliding his way into the way Will thinks with a sharpness keen as a scalpel, and Will should never have clutched at him looking for comfort and distraction, even if, by that same action, it had helped to push Dr. Hannibal Lecter firmly away. There would have been other - better, safer, less *complicated* - ways; Will is nothing if not skilled in the many fine arts of getting people to fuck off.

Will needs to get out of the bed and put this afternoon behind him before it gets any messier than it already is. Leave the sex as a happy but distant memory - that he will jack off to for possibly the rest of his life. He can go home and drown his sorrows about losing access to such fine dick with a bottle of whiskey and seven sympathetic dogs.

Lecter’s gentle hand reaches out to cup his jaw and Will finds himself hopelessly leaning into it, a warm thumb stroking distractingly over his cheekbone. “Never attempt to win by force what can be won by deception.”

“Of *course* you speak Italian,” Will sighs, clutching at Lecter’s wrist with both hands, and lets his eyes flutter shut again lest they have gone a soft and incriminating omega gold.

Everyone's pupils dilate when they're aroused, but alphas and omegas must suffer the further tell of their irises shifting hue as well. A prickling in the sockets, an itch without tears, and Will's eyes can - wholly without permission - make a liar of his swifter scalding tongue.

Lecter's deep chuckle touches something visceral in Will's stomach, another caress as physical as his hand on Will's face. "Unrepentantly."

"No, I don't think you repent much, do you?"

There is the soft secret sound of flesh sliding against hideously expensive cloth, and the mattress dips by Will's body. "I have another if you're interested," Lecter murmurs directly to Will's pulse, his hot breath skating once more over Will's throat and his free hand spanning over the width of one of Will's thighs.

"Spare me the Italia*nnn* -" Will's words break, artless, when Lecter's tongue licks up his jugular, that mouth he is becoming overfamiliar with taking back his mouth and plundering it ruthlessly. Holding him in place with that grip around his jaw.

That hand on Will's thigh slides slowly, dangerously higher, all but burning Will through the thin barrier of the bedsheet, and Will has to break the kiss because he is dizzy in the darkness behind his eyes, his chest heaving for breath and his body swaying treacherously close to Lecter's solid breadth of heat.

"Ah-"

Lecter kisses him again, hard and quick, and his eyes swim like burning coals when Will manages to pry apart his eyelids to look at him, the scant view of the bedroom beyond Lecter lost to haze. Will feels scorched to the core. "Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are."

Their legs are pressed together now. Arms, limbs, fingers, hair. Blood. Sweat. Slick. Scents intertwined.

"I," Will croaks, dropping his gaze to Lecter's nose but all too aware of Lecter's eyes still watching him fiercely, fondly, fingers and thumb pulling almost playfully at his ear, "need to use your shower, and then I should probably get going."

Watching Lecter's nose, Will can see the beta's smile as it begins, stretching slow and wide and creasing the corners of Lecter's cheeks. "My shower is yours for the using, but, unless you have somewhere that you urgently need to be, I do insist that you stay for dinner. Since we missed the promised lunch." When that smile moves closer again, Will - finally - manages to tilt his head just enough that Lecter's lips brush his cheek rather than helping themselves to another kiss from Will's swollen mouth - but the good doctor is undeterred, and seems just as happy to nuzzle Will there instead, nose dragging teasingly down into the scruff of Will's stubble. "It would be terribly remiss of me to allow a guest to leave my home hungry."

"Dinner," says Will flatly, his head tipped just enough to note the bright *afternoon* sunbeams coming in through the pale, fine muslin of Lecter's day curtains.

“You are familiar with the concept, I hope?”

Probably not in the same manner that Dr. Hannibal My-Average-Annual-Income-Could-Probably-Fund-A-Small-Foreign-Nation Lecter means it, no. Will has the feeling that a man who brings his own tupperware on a not-too-fancy FBI field trip - just so he can make and cart around his own cooking rather than broach the plebeian landscape of the local greasy spoon - is not the sort of guy who finds slapping the leftovers of yesterday’s Mexican takeaway in the microwave for a few minutes and then scarfing it down before hitting the pillows an acceptable use of the word ‘dinner’.

“Well,” Will concedes, because his last significant meal was breakfast and coffee and a toasted bacon sandwich can only last him so far before he swoons on Lecter for an even *more* embarrassing reason than he’s been doing so far already, “it beats getting kicked out of bed before the afterglow has even faded.”

“Your previous bedpartners have not been ones to have you linger?” Lecter actually sounds somewhat offended on Will’s behalf, which is. Strange. Nice, but strange. “A shame. I believe that the best things in life should be savoured thoroughly.”

Will had rather assumed that, given his mouth is still kiss-bruised and sensitive like an over-ripened fruit, tingling when he lifts his fingers thoughtfully to his lips. “So I see.”

The crook of Lecter’s mouth suggests he knows *exactly* what Will is thinking, a rogue’s grin pressed to Will’s knuckles just enough for the dried blood still there to flake onto Lecter’s fuller lower lip. Small spots smear to wet red rust. “Dinner then?”

“Dinner,” Will agrees, still staring beneath his lashes at Lecter’s bloody mouth. Half a beat, “And until dinner?”

There is no surprise when Will is pushed back gently onto the mattress, Lecter’s palm on his chest and a light strain gathering itself between the muscles of Will’s thighs and the small of his back. From the cradle of a mound of soft and expensive pillows, Will does his best to look unimpressed when his bedpartner pretty much crawls all over him, but the task is an impossible one with hot skin pressed so close and shifting limbs sliding Will’s protective sheet to the side. Their erections rub together for a moment in tantalising promise, and Will’s hands fly upwards to grip into the thick strands of hair that cover Lecter’s broad chest, something like a guttural moan catching in the back of his throat.

Lecter has his arms braced either side of Will’s head - blocking Will’s lines of sight in such a way that all Will can think whenever he dares to try and look away from Lecter’s face is *God, his muscles* -, his hair hanging over his brow in devastating disarray. All Will can feel and breathe and see is Hannibal Lecter.

“This is a one-afternoon stand, Will, is it not?” The ass looks pleased with himself again, and is shamelessly letting Will *see* that he is pleased with himself when Will knows Lecter has enough control over his facial expressions to hide his feelings should he wish to. He’s deliberately being *infuriating,* and Will still slides his legs out from their cross-legged position for him anyway, letting Lecter’s weight descend between his thighs and onto Will more fully. They both groan, and Will arches up from the mattress to earn that sound from

Lecter again, taking *great* pleasure at the sight of the beta's fraying composure. "There is still a great deal of the afternoon left to be enjoyed."

"Don't waste it talking," Will advises Lecter bluntly, and smiles sharp at the way Lecter laughs throatily, teeth flashing in that smile of his again. The kiss he presses briefly against Will's sweaty temple, however, is almost fond - but Will has little time to think on it, for Lecter dips his head and seizes Will's mouth savagely again straight afterwards, the kiss rough until Will softens beneath him, goes pliant and yields for conquest.

His lips still taste like blood.

When Will next stirs, it's evening. Lecter, already awake, showered and dressed before him, directs him to the en-suite and then disappears after informing Will that dinner will be ready in approximately half an hour.

It doesn't take Will that long to shower - honestly, he probably spends more time gawking at the size of Lecter's spacious shower and trying to figure out what each of the myriad bottles and jars on the shelf are for, their labels (*if* they're even labelled) unfamiliar and often in a foreign language. Eventually, Will grabs something that smells relatively inoffensive and that he hopes is body wash and gives himself a good scrub down in the lather, the steam around him quickly filled with the scent of woody, musky lavender.

He's still trailing that scent behind him after he has dried, dressed in his crumpled clothing, and made his way downstairs, his hair still a little damp and clinging to the back of his neck. Dr. Lecter's house is maze-like but the main staircases are easy enough to find, and Will follows his nose to the kitchen when the smell of cooking meat overcomes the scent of body wash still clinging to his skin.

The kitchen continues the house's overall theme of ostentation, though its opulence seems less Asian-inspired than the bedroom in which Lecter lays his head. The sharp edges present in the master's interior design, however, persist, though the shining stainless steel of Lecter's tools and appliances and the cool travertine of his countertops are softened a little by contrast with pale barn wood along one wall, cabinetry made with warmer - but more dramatically grained - wood opposite. There are grey leather panels on the kitchen island and there is a low, squishy chair set in the corner of the room: a good place from which to survey the whole kitchen and the hallway Will had just walked along, including the narrow set of servants' stairs that Will had somehow missed on his way downstairs.

With the blinds over the windows and door pulled to half-mast, the kitchen feels like its own gleaming, self-contained kingdom, and there is no question who is its king. Notably dressed in a pressed red shirt and trousers like he *hadn't* just spent all afternoon in bed, standing at the stovetop on the kitchen island and simmering something in a pan, Dr. Lecter is the epicentre

of the room's blend of smooth elegance and ruthless practicality and clearly master of all he surveys - including anyone who walks into his kitchen.

"You have a beautiful home, Dr. Lecter," Will says, more as a statement of fact than as an intended compliment. Lecter's interior decorating, he knows, is something that people would describe and effuse over as beautiful, if only because their vocabularies are limited by both politeness and a lack of understanding it enough to know what *else* to call it.

Will feels disconnected from that concept. If he were to describe Lecter's home as beautiful, speaking for himself rather than from a place of general consensus, the prevalent *beautiful* that other people use would not be the one he meant - though saying as much could be considered rude, and, if there's one thing various battleaxe matriarchs of Will's Southern upbringing had taught him (with the good solid smack of a wooden spoon to the hand or head), it's that you don't insult the one feeding you.

Lecter's amused huff of air suggests that he hears at least some of the words Will doesn't say, moving away from the stovetop to begin plating cooked steaks on a board beside him. "Have you any allergies?"

"That may have been a prudent question to ask *before* you turned up unannounced at my motel room with breakfast, doctor."

Or before Lecter had begun to cook their evening meal.

Aware that he sounds ungrateful, Will does his best to ease some of his already-aired bluntness - mostly because he's hungry, and those steaks look incredible. "No, no allergies that I'm aware of."

"Glad to hear it," says Lecter. "Perhaps you might take through our wine and light the candles on the table? The matches are in the sideboard."

Will grabs the wine decanter full of crimson liquid that Lecter tips his head towards and takes it through to the dimly-lit dining room, back the way he'd come. The table has already been set with glasses and cutlery at the head and the seat to its right, so Will places the decanter between the two settings and then goes to the sideboard.

The matches are where Lecter had said they'd be, but crouching down to get them puts Will on eye level with the top of the sideboard and perhaps the strangest 'floral' arrangement he's seen outside the home of a Voodoo practitioner: a tower of birds' feathers; quills; eggs; small taxidermied animals; beetles; butterflies, and animal skulls and other tiny bones, all sitting atop a long dried snakeskin. It's so intricate and *weird*, Will is tempted by the childish impulse to poke it - but doesn't, because only idiots poke things that look like potential fetishes or talismans, and, if Will did, he'd probably send the whole lot spilling all over the floor.

In contrast to the wall of green and growing plants that take up one whole wall of the dining room, the table decoration is equally as dead as the… construct on the sideboard. Set atop a long table runner the same midnight blue shade as the moulding on two of the room's walls, the centrepiece is a long, complicated twist of many small pieces of sharp, branching antlers

locked sensuously together. Nestled around and between the points are vibrant red and yellow fall leaves and several fat, deep crimson candles.

Will almost draws blood reaching in amongst the antlers to light the latter, the bones sharp enough to scrape him through the fabric of his shirt. Fire licks his fingertips before he manages to withdraw again, a quick bright sting.

In the dim, the candles glow deep warm gold and red, and they thrust sharp-edged shadows over the table and room where the antlers block their light. A silhouette play of woods and teeth and thorns. Wolfish wild things lurking in the gloom, and the little girls in red cloaks they feed upon.

Lecter arrives with their food whilst Will is still checking his arms for blood, nodding approvingly at the sight of the dancing candle flames. “Beautifully done, Will.”

“Lighting a few candles is hardly worth a compliment,” Will responds, casually dismissive, returning the matches to where he had found them so he can come back to the table. The head is Lecter’s seat, naturally, so Will stands behind the chair to Lecter’s right, his stomach rumbling quietly at the plate Hannibal places in front of him. “What’re we having?”

“Steak and sticky red wine shallots served with green beans.” Lecter is obviously pleased to be asked, pouring their wine as Will takes a seat and spreads his napkin over his lap. In a thin stream by candlelight, the wine is the same deep red as Lecter's shirt.

“Smells good,” Will offers.

He means it too; the meal on the plate in front of him smells as good as it looks, and Lecter has plated it impeccably. The steak takes pride of place on the china, with the deep maroon shallots and their delicious-looking dark red wine reduction spooned over its top. A helping of green beans pops at the side.

When Lecter sits down as well, Will raises his cutlery to slice into the steak. The meat is still a lovely deep pink on the inside, medium rare, and when Will forks a piece into his mouth he discovers it to be beautifully tender and flavourful, its juices bursting over his tongue. Will’s eyes flutter closed and he lets out a hum of absolute pleasure as he swallows - only to realise half a beat too late his hum has rounded itself off into a low, rich and *entirely audible* purr.

Eyes flying open again, he colours, dropping his fork and clapping one hand over his mouth. “I’m sorry.”

Purring so loudly and openly is, for an adult, something kept only for those one is emotionally close to: family, intimate friends, and partners. To do it in public without that connection is, depending on the context, either quite childish or sexually provocative, and Will had intended neither.

Rather than looking either amused or annoyed by Will’s *faux pas,* Lecter looks like, were beta vocal chords capable of producing the same reverberations as an alpha’s or omega’s, he’d be purring right back at Will. The candlelight picks out the gold flecks in his dark eyes

as he watches Will, their lids half-lowered like a particularly content cat's. "Once more, you offer me the highest of praise, and then apologise for your generosity."

"It's good," Will says a little defensively, still feeling flustered heat burning high in his cheeks and throat. He snatches up his glass to hide his face behind, taking a large gulp of the wine within. Dark and dry bittersweetness floods his mouth, heavy on the tannins, and Will has to do his best not to screw up his face at the taste of the unidentified wine: he much prefers whiskey.

"I'm pleased that you enjoy it," Lecter replies graciously, and mercifully drops the subject to begin eating his own food.

Will puts down his wine to follow suit, not wanting his food to grow cold. He can feel eyes on him whilst he eats, but every time he lifts his gaze to glance at Lecter, the beta isn't looking at him. Lecter *does* look across from him when Will stares at him a few seconds too long, his expression inquisitive as he reaches out to take a sip of his wine, but Will only shakes his head and ducks behind the fluff of his now-dry fringe, concentrating once more on his plate.

The next time Lecter's eye catches his, both of them a good way through their dinner, Will deliberately lets his gaze drift past the doctor, looking to the pale forest landscape paper on the wall opposite his own seat and all the plants growing on shelves floating out of it. By candlelight, the branches of the forest could be moving, and the air tastes of smoke and meat and distant growing green things when Will breathes it in.

In a room decorated with dead things and dancing fire, a living wall is a little incongruous.

"I was wondering about the plants."

"Herbs," says Lecter, cutting another piece out of his steak and spearing it with his fork, "for my cooking. I find their aroma often enhances the flavours of the food. The environment, after all, is also part of the dining experience, and the best meals must embrace all the senses before they can be considered truly sublime."

"Like how freshly-caught and cooked food always tastes better outdoors," Will says, and tries not to look too long at Lecter's lips when Lecter pops the piece of meat delicately into his mouth, teeth dragging just slightly along the tines of his silver fork.

Chews. Swallows.

"Just so. The taste and smell of the ingredients mixes with the scents of the outside world, the feeling of the wind on your skin and the heat of the fire you have just cooked your meal upon. The texture of the food in your mouth as the leaves crinkle and dance around you, the world set afire by autumn for your eyes."

Will considers the words, reaching for his wine glass again and pressing the rim to his lips. The taste of the alcohol had improved after the first sip, its flavour mellowed by accompanying food and familiarity. Still, though it wets Will's mouth, it leaves him more

thirsty afterwards for the drinking of it. “So it’s true then: hot cocoa really *does* taste better in an orange mug?”

“And strawberry mousse tastes sweetest served on a white plate.”

Will finishes the last few bites of his own food as Lecter talks, dragging half a green bean around his plate to soak up as much of the red wine reduction as possible before eating it. The last mouthful as good as the first.

“Our senses affect each other more than most are aware they do," Lecter says, "informing our perceptions at a subconscious level and constructing our associations and biases out of their endless cross-contaminations.”

“You perceive emotions to be a result of our combined senses, and not part of their decision-making process?” Will places his knife and fork together on his now empty plate, fiddling with their angle until he sees Lecter also set down his cutlery from the corner of his eye.

“Do you plan to extol to me the virtues of grandmother’s infamous cherry pie?”

“It was pecan pie, if you must know,” Will says somewhat wryly, flicking his gaze up at Lecter only long enough to confirm the amused twist is back at the corner of the other man’s mouth. Apparently, they have a similar sense of humour. “Only damn thing she could bake and bake well, so she always fed it to half the town.”

“You have fond memories attached to the dish,” Lecter observes, and Will tries not to be bothered by the way they both reach for their wine glasses at the same time. Coincidence, or more of Will’s eternal unconscious mimicry? “Tell me, Will, has any other pecan pie tasted the same?”

Will sips his drink. Shakes his head. “Nothing like it. I’ve eaten some better versions, and a great many worse. But emotionally? There’s no replacing it.”

“Affection is a placebo ingredient,” says Lecter agreeably, swirling his wine, though Will cannot imagine what the doctor’s face might do if someone attempted to justify terrible cooking to him with the trite *it doesn’t matter what it tastes like when it’s made with love.*

There is a curious shallowness to Will’s imagination when it comes to envisaging what Lecter might or might not do in any given situation. Too many depths as yet left unplumbed, fathoms obscured by the social veneers Lecter keeps bobbing at the surface. How much of it is pure, as opposed to merely froth?

Still, Lecter's waters ebb and flow - “But you are correct, of course. We are all, to one degree or another, affected by the perceptions of the world around us as we are by our own perceptions, with one influencing the other. Once emotion has been generated, it further prejudices our decisions, creating an eternally cycling feedback loop. Perhaps the cocoa tastes best because it is served in my favourite orange mug. Perhaps the orange mug is my favourite because it makes my cocoa taste best.”

Lecter pauses, wetting his lips with another sip of his drink and licking them clean before asking, “Would you care for dessert?”

Will startles. “You had time to make dessert as well?”

“Leftovers, I’m afraid. I found myself unusually distracted this afternoon.” Placing down his wine again, Lecter rises from his seat and gathers their plates.

Despite the change in angle, Will doesn’t miss the sly glance the doctor gives him with his words, and rolls his eyes. “Can I help in any way?” Will might not dine with others very often, but even he knows that it’s bad form to let the one who did the cooking do the washing up as well.

Lecter is already on his way back to the kitchen, the smile aimed over his shoulder at Will a perfect, genial thing. “As you are my guest, I insist you stay precisely where you are.”

“You insist upon a great deal, Dr. Lecter.”

“And such arduous tasks I set you.”

Will makes a face at Lecter’s back before it disappears around the corner to the kitchen, if only because, well, the things Lecter insists upon *aren’t* arduous at all - getting wonderfully fucked, and fed fantastic food afterwards -, but Will is still left with the niggling feeling he’s both imposing and being imposed upon somehow.

Though that could just be Dr. Lecter’s gracefully domineering personality; the beta is clearly someone who is accustomed to getting his own way.

Will occupies himself by pouring them both more wine, giving himself a smaller amount so he should still be safe to drive home after the meal. Lecter is taking long enough in the kitchen Will knows he’s going to be presented with something that looks like it ought to be served in the kind of exclusive restaurant that doesn’t cater to the strained budgets of FBI Academy professors (again), but he’s *still* surprised when Lecter returns and places a small, rectangular plate down in front of him, the wedge of dark chocolate-covered tart atop it looking too perfect to be real. Orange zest has been grated over the chocolate surface, bright orange against brown, and more of the peel is distributed through the quenelle of cream carefully nestled up against the tart’s side with a fresh slice of orange.

“Dark chocolate orange ricotta tart with a honey almond crust,” Lecter announces, already retaking his seat.

He had rolled up his sleeves sometime during his return to the kitchen and has forgotten to roll them back down again, his arms exposed to the elbows and utterly distracting. The hair along the back of them gleams in the candlelight, and, when the muscles shift under the skin, all Will can think about is the *last* time he had seen those muscles flexing for him, bearing Lecter’s weight as Lecter had moved above Will in bed.

“This is what your *leftovers* look like?” Will asks him with some disbelief, voice halfway to cracking, because he’s spent long enough already that afternoon with his mind in the gutter

and should really focus on the topics that allow him to find a change of mental scenery. North of the belt-line. Omegas his age aren't supposed to get so many erections in one day outside of heat, *surely?*

“The cream is fresh,” says Lecter, as though he actually thinks Will may be complaining about being served leftover food.

Will can’t summon up the energy required to explain his point *and* control his libido at the same time so settles for just eating his dessert, the tart’s chocolate shell breaking under pressure from his spoon with a quiet, mouth-watering *crack*. The layer of orange ricotta filling underneath is rich and creamy, and, were he not already forewarned by his earlier weakness and guarding his reactions, Will would probably be purring at the taste of it.

Lecter seems to be waiting for just that reaction. He’s quite open about the way he’s watching Will eat, and only very slowly drops his gaze when Will glances up and catches him at it, a thread of obvious laughter in the lines around his mouth his response to Will’s glower. Will would like to dump the tart on Lecter’s head for the presumption but, unfortunately, the tart is as delicious as the main course had been and Will refuses to waste any of it. Perhaps even *more* delicious, and especially for the novelty. Will rarely has the opportunity to eat dessert (twinkies and granola bars eaten in a hurry on the road or between classes as a replacement for a solid meal don’t count); he doesn’t go out much for meals or entertain at his house, and the time, skill and effort necessary to prepare dessert for one at home make the endeavour hardly worth its reward.

Will clears his plate with a speed and voracity that is probably rude, licking his lips and teeth for the remnants of cream and stray crumbs of honeyed almonds. Unwilling to intrude upon the quiet between them, he slowly drinks his wine as Lecter finishes his slice of tart, the delicate *clink* of Lecter’s spoon touching plate breaking Will out of the reverie of watching the candlelight refract through his glass.

“That was delicious,” he says quietly, “thank you.”

Lecter accepts the compliment with a gracious dip of the head. “It was my pleasure, Will, truly.” A pause for Lecter to sip his own wine. “I have more left of the tart. Would you like to take it home with you?”

Will opens his mouth to protest - they’re not friends, and the gesture smacks too much of charity for comfort - but Lecter beats him to the punch.

“You would be doing me a favour, as it is taking up some much-needed space in my fridge. And you seem to have enjoyed it.” That alone would not have been enough, but Lecter softens his proposition with humour, a callback to their earlier conversation: “Will, I *insist.*”

And so, dinner over, Will ends up standing by Lecter’s open front door with his jacket on and a box thrust into his arms, a half-empty tart pan and a small tub of the orange cream bumping softly against its insides when Will moves. Flushed from embarrassment and wine.

He can’t believe Lecter gave him the cream as well.

“Dr. Lecter -”

Fingers beneath Will’s chin firmly tip his head upwards, and his words die swiftly under the brief pressure of a kiss at the corner of his parted lips.

Withdrawing just enough to better see Will’s face, Lecter regards Will with all the doting pride of a new dog owner whose puppy has just gotten through a night for the first time without peeing on the carpet. Indulgent. “Thank you for the pleasure of your company this afternoon, Will.”

Outside of the fucking, Will’s not too sure how much of a *pleasure* he’s been, but Lecter had seemed entertained throughout. Though that may have something to do with the way Will is still gawking unattractively at the beta, having not expected… that. Any of *that.* Another scorcher of a kiss to the *mouth,* maybe, making out against the wall, but not the sweet, shockingly familiar little peck he’d given Will, Will’s lips and cheek tingling from the soft sensation of Lecter’s mouth against them.

Or perhaps Will is just going red again, flushing like a damn schoolboy getting his first kiss. God *damn* it.

“...Yeah,” he manages eventually, dumbly, swallowing spit. Tart case and tub going *thump-thump* inside the box in his grasp when he shifts from one foot to the other: the Tell-Tale Heart. “Yeah, uh. You too. It was something.”

In a rush of what can only be described as either his common sense *finally* kicking in (hours too late for it to be of any use) or cowardice, Will all but flees for his car. Without saying goodbye. Lecter, of course, stays standing in his doorway smiling his infuriatingly unreadable smile as Will dumps the dessert down on the seat beside him and buckles up, raising one hand in a casual farewell as Will pulls away from his house and puts the man as far behind him as quickly as Baltimore’s roads and traffic laws will allow.

Will won’t be able to avoid ever seeing Hannibal Lecter again, he knows. They both haunt Abigail’s hospital room too often for that, and Lecter's now on the consultancy list for the FBI. If Jack pulls Will in on another case when Will gets back to work, it’s likely that their paths will cross again sooner or later. But this afternoon - *well.* Aside from being a fantastic distraction from Hobbs, this afternoon has firmly closed off some of the avenues Lecter can saunter down that feature Will as the destination at the end, leaving a few less routes for Will to keep his eye upon.

Lecter had been a great lay, but there’s too much going on behind his eyes that Will can’t reach for them to keep up a frequent acquaintanceship. The sex and food and laughter are to be firmly kept for reminiscence *only,* because with a man like Lecter? Getting fucked could rapidly turn to getting fucked *over.*

Chapter End Notes

Chaud-froid: (hot-cold) A French term describing a meat or fish dish that is first cooked and then chilled before eating, served in its own jelly or a sauce.

Curious how things can work on you even when you recognise them. - Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs*

A reminder of what Hannibal's 'floral arrangement' looks like on his dining room sideboard. Are there even any flowers in there? Seriously, Hannibal.

Hot chocolate/cocoa tastes better in an orange (or cream!) cup.

Recipes (chosen for time constraints and because they're made using traditional aphrodisiacs; Will, please look at your dinner and the red candles and get a clue):
Steak and sticky red wine shallots
Dark chocolate orange ricotta tart with honey almond crust
Hannibal paired the food with a cabernet sauvignon, but Will didn't care enough to note it and, surprisingly, what kind of wine they were drinking was the one thing Hannibal *didn't* want to go off on a tangent about as I was writing this chapter. (Why, oh why, can the man never shut up…?)

bouchée

Chapter Summary

Will faces an ambush when he returns to work, and receives an apology at home.

Chapter Notes

Thank you very much for all your kind words and kudos on the first chapter! Honestly, they mean more than I can say.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will had been tired even before he'd made it to his first class after his break. As soon as he'd set foot on Academy grounds he'd been swamped by people trying to talk to him and congratulatory backslapping, and his class' standing ovation upon his entrance? After all that? Had not been appreciated. There's something so *tasteless* about one man receiving praise for putting another man down, especially when only dumb luck and gut instinct had gotten Will there. A dead woman. An orphaned girl in a coma. And ten bullets.

Even after hours of practice, Will is still haunted by the spectre of Garret Jacob Hobbs at the shooting range, and ten bullets on target won't scrub out the maggot of him eating into Will's brain. Nor another ten bullets, or ten more after that. Hobbs is under Will's skin now, his blood soaked through Will's pores, and applauding that? No. *No.* Let the echoes die and let that be an end to *everything* about the Minnesota Shrike, no matter what Jack thinks - *erroneously* - about Abigail Hobbs helping her father. So when that poor girl wakes up she can find some way to move on with her life, and so the dead can rest in their graves and not in Will's bloody red dreams at night. Nor, as the shooting range proves, in Will's shadow during the day.

Class is dismissed and Will is glad of it, shutting down the projector and moving to immediately put his things away. Lecturing on the Shrike is an exercise in bitter autoflagellation and, thanks to his current class schedule and the FBI's insistence on course study materials being as fresh and relevant for their trainees as possible, Will gets to do this exact same lecture twice more before moving onto it in piecemeal due to the copycat.

(Every time, Will finds himself going from looking at photographs of the scene to standing in the Hobbs' sunlight-filled kitchen, the floor covered in scarlet and his gun shaking in his hands. Abigail is dying, always dying, on the linoleum, her blue eyes wide and teary and ringed with fear-stricken gold, crimson lifeblood pumping out of the slash on her neck. The air tastes bitter-metallic-*sour*, like distressed omega, like iron and gunpowder and screams.

"See?" whispers Hobbs. A dead man talking. A swarm of flies. *"See?"*)

A few more of Will's students linger behind than usually do, clearly wanting to talk to their professor about his 'celebrity' serial killer catch, but Will ignores them all as he usually does, keeping his head down and continuing to pack his bag. If they have a question relevant to the work he's set them or their studies, they have his email and his office hours. If they're just looking for a story, Will is refusing interviews.

Dr. Alana Bloom is a breath of fresh air as she breezes past the chattering loiterers, the click of her heels in their familiar pace on the floor marking her arrival. She doesn't touch any of the trainees as she enters the classroom but they take her gentle beta presence as their cue to slowly disperse, drifting away from Will's desk like dandelion seeds caught on a lazy wind.

"Hi," Will offers when he catches sight of her over the frames of his glasses. He's never too busy to talk to her - a friend in need, and all that. Will is - *lamentably*, as his pride likes to remind him on the more emotionally crushing occasions - available for most things, nearly *all* things, for Alana Bloom. If Alana would like to take him up on them sometime. Any time?

Or not.

Will leaves his bag and comes around the desk to speak with her.

"How are you, Will?" Alana is clutching her hands. Alana is clutching at her hands, and the tension in her forearms suggests she's just a little shy of wringing them.

"Uh, I have no idea." Will doesn't know if he's smiling or grimacing at the question, and rubs self-consciously at the back of his neck. It's good to be back at work, doing something he knows he's good at, but. Work has *people,* and the constant gushing about the Minnesota Shrike is fraying Will's patience.

One benefit of keeping his gaze low by default is that Will gets to do a slow glance up whoever he's speaking to, and Alana is always a particular delight. Her skirt is red, her shirt black and white, and her dark hair gleams in the bald classroom lighting like curls of polished rosewood. She's… tense for some reason, but not stressed, not upset. It's something closer to nerves.

Nerves can be good. If it's nervous anticipation, rather than dread.

"Um," says Alana, and bites her lip. She's fumbling for her words, and it's charming.

A pinprick of hope flutters in Will's chest. Momentous events in an individual's life often cause the people around them to re-evaluate their own priorities, *momento mori,* and Will wouldn't mind Alana doing some re-evaluations about their friendship. Mostly in the ways they could *develop* that friendship. It isn't socially conventional for a beta woman to get romantically involved with an omega man, not without an alpha also being brought into the mix somehow (or in *desperate times,* a beta man), but Alana isn't the kind of person to let convention dictate her choices. It's one of the reasons they get along so well.

“I didn’t want you to be ambushed -”

“Is this an ambush?” Amused, Will’s smile emerges more easily the second time around, and he leans back comfortably on his desk. Inviting.

Alana isn’t eased. “Ambush is later. Immediately later. Soon-to-now.” She’s speaking more quickly, her words tripping over themselves as she rubs one thumb over her half-closed fingers. And Will, his smile dying, can see why: behind her, through the doorway his students are still streaming out of, Jack Crawford is approaching like a ram with the largest horns in the field. *Great.* “When Jack arrives, consider yourself ambushed.”

“Here’s Jack,” Will says shortly, and lets his little pinprick of hope smother itself.

Jack stops beside Alana, the both of them forming a wide obstacle to the exit. By the way they eye each other up, it’s clear they’ve been talking before this, both agreeing on some overall point but evidently disagreeing on the finer details.

Primarily, about which one of them was going to speak to Will first.

Will *isn’t* going to enjoy this conversation.

“How was class?” Jack asks, as though he cares about Will’s *teaching.* Alana had covered many of Will’s classes whilst he’d been away, and she’d let slip that Jack had been by during class hours more than a few times to see if Will had decided to come back to work early. Wanting something.

Will slides off his desk, and goes back to packing his bag. His students have all gone now, and it’s gotten less pleasant sitting up front there with Jack’s casually dominant presence added to the atmosphere. Jack’s heavy alpha scent easily overwhelms the light, sweet violet-anise smell of Alana’s perfume that Will had been enjoying mixed with his own scent in the air - something Will hardly notices most of the time, except when it’s gone.

“They applauded. It was inappropriate.” To say the least.

“The review board begs to differ.” Jack’s caught somewhere between pride, joviality, and smugness, pleased at being proven right for hauling Will out of his classroom in the first place. No matter what Alana had to say about it at the time - and every time she’d seen Jack during Will’s enforced leave. “You’re up for a commendation and they’ve okayed active return to the field.”

Alana stands her ground and leaps in whilst Will is still processing that and the little flicker of pleasure it gives him, his fingers pausing on the zip of his bag. “Question is: do you *want* to go back in the field?”

“*I* want him back in the field,” Jack says - to Alana, rather than Will. Apparently Will’s opinion doesn’t matter here, the *adults* talking over his head. It would be insulting if they were doing it because Will’s an omega - except it’s obviously got nothing to do with dynamics. Instead, it’s insulting because they both think they know what’s best for Will. “And I’ve told the board I’m recommending a psych evaluation.”

A psych evaluation. Will looks at Alana, hurt despite himself and her soft, apologetic eyes. *How are you, Will?* really *is* just another wording of *And how does that make you feel?* "Are we starting now?"

Alana almost startles, quickly explaining, "Oh, the session wouldn't be with me."

"Hannibal Lecter's a better fit," says Jack, and that's wonderful. Now he and Alana are backing each other up, and they've picked the worst time and thing possible to do it about. "Your relationship's not personal. But if you *are* more comfortable with Dr. Bloom…"

Jack really *is* going out of his way to ignore just how much Will hates - and how much Will has *publicised* that hate of - 99.9% (recurring) of all psychiatrists. *After recommending a psych eval in the first place.* And of all the psychiatrists he knows, that he knows Will knows, that the FB-fucking-I has on their payroll, both permanent and temporary consultancy-wise, Jack's landed on *Lecter* for Will's psych eval.

Lecter, who actually *can't* do the evaluation because Will has slept with him. Lecter, who Will has been deliberately avoiding since their ill-advised hook-up a week ago. Will has been visiting Abigail at the hospital in the late night, well outside of visiting hours (one of the perks of a special agent badge), knowing that Lecter very likely wouldn't be there then. He'd said he didn't want to cross paths with Lecter again if he could help it and he'd *meant* that (although it hadn't stopped him from devouring the leftover tart and orange cream Lecter had given him, a slice each evening with a glass of whiskey until the dessert was all gone).

His hurt now edged with anger, Will finishes zipping up his bag and grabs it, snapping, "*No,* I'm not going to be comfortable with anyone inside my head." And Will isn't going to give anyone the opportunity to pry their way in there; he's been prodded at quite enough in his life already, thanks, no thanks. "Besides -"

"You've never killed anyone before, Will," Alana protests, ignoring the sharp metallic note rising in Will's scent along with his temper. Even *Will* can smell it on himself through his aftershave, a taste like lightning catching at the roof of his mouth. "It's a deadly force encounter. It's a lot to digest."

"I used to work homicide," Will grits out, striding out from behind his desk with long enough steps that the way he goes around Jack and Alana looks natural, bag in one hand.

Jack's voice halts him before the exit. "Reason you *used* to work homicide is that you couldn't stomach pulling the trigger." Will turns on his heel, not caring at all now for the scowl on his face. "You just pulled the trigger ten times."

And what he sees in Jack's expression - "Wait, so a psych eval *isn't* a formality?"

Jack is *demanding* this. It's not just ticking off the boxes, crossing the *t*s and dotting the *i*s. Jack Crawford thinks Will needs a psychological evaluation.

Jack Crawford thinks Will needs psychiatric *assistance.*

“No,” says Jack, “it’s so I can get some sleep at night. I asked you to get close to the Hobbs thing. I need to know you didn’t get too close.” Changes tack, just enough to put Will on the indignant back foot. “How many nights did you spend in Abigail Hobbs’ hospital room, Will?”

God forbid Will treat one of Jack’s *suspects* with anything more than absolute distrust.

How many nights is Will *still* spending in Abigail Hobbs’ hospital room? It’s soothing, in the darkness, listening to the machines around her. Listening to her heartbeat. Listening to her breathe. Her father didn’t kill her. Will didn’t kill her, his mind haunted by the ghost of her father’s psyche. She’s alive.

Will wants to explain exactly none of this to Jack. “Therapy doesn’t work on me,” he says. Jaw set. Tone flat.

Jack hums disbelievingly and approaches him, step by firm determined step. *Deliberately* trying to overcome the anger scent Will is still loudly exuding by broadcasting his alpha pheromones everywhere in a rather crude show of dominance, all but demanding the omega in Will offer the alpha in front of him his neck with their increasing proximity.

Jack’s pheromones smell overly peppery to Will, itching his nose and sticking sour in the back of his throat along with Jack’s *gall.* How dare he?

“Therapy doesn’t work on you because *you* won’t let it.”

Will keeps his head firmly upright and unbent, grinding his back molars together as something to do that *isn’t* hitting the head of the BAU with his workbag, lips peeling back from his teeth in a warning omega *hiss*. “Because I know all the tricks.”

Jack glowers back at him, righteous in his self-assurance. He means well, or at the very least is trying to assuage his own guilt from sending a teacher into a deadly confrontation with a serial killer, but Will doesn’t appreciate the heavy-handed way he’s showing it. “Well, perhaps you need to *un*-learn some tricks.”

Alana is gentler as she approaches, instinctively trying to both appease the alpha and soothe the omega beside her. “Will, why not have a conversation with Hannibal? He was there; he knows what you went through.”

Because a *conversation* with Hannibal Lecter would serve no purpose other than to stroke the beta’s ego that Will has gone to speak to him again. Lecter *cannot* do Will’s psych evaluation after fucking him seven ways ‘til Sunday; the ethics board would have a fit if they found out. Will’s job at the Academy - never mind his consulting fieldwork work for the BAU - would be on the line for knowingly withholding information that could affect the validity of the evaluations determining his suitability for work at the FBI, and Lecter could have his licence to practise medicine revoked.

There is still no way Will is going to tell Alana Bloom that he let Lecter fuck him if he can help it though. It might give her the wrong idea.

“Lecter won’t do.”

“Then you want me to do your evaluation?” Alana still looks concerned rather than pleased, but it’s one of the reasons Will would trust her to do something like this for him if he *must* get it done. Unlike many others of her profession that Will can name, she’d do it to help him rather than studying him to help herself - though Will would rather Alana see him as her friend and as a potential romantic partner than as a *patient,* however temporarily. “If that’s what would make you feel most at ease.”

“Those my only two options?” Will asks Jack, turning from Alana for the moment and not bothering to mask any of his bitterness. He can still taste bile.

Jack… Jack had to make the offer in the name of being accommodating, of really caring about the state of Will’s mental and emotional wellbeing, but it’s clear he doesn’t want Will getting his evaluation done by *Alana Bloom.* She’s too good a psychiatrist, too good a person, and Will’s friend. She *might* clear Will for fieldwork (and she also might *not*), but she’ll make her worries about doing so quite plain in writing.

Jack prefers to have wiggle room, and so Jack locks his jaw like a boxer about to go back into the ring. “What’s wrong with Dr. Lecter?”

“I told you,” Will begins to explain as patiently as he can, “Lecter’s no good -”

But Jack cuts him short *again,* turning accusingly on Alana, whose spine stiffens in surprise. The adults are arguing again: whose fault is it the child on his baby reins won’t be steered the way they want? “*You* recommended him.”

“Because he’s a wonderful psychiatrist!” Alana says sharply, her goodwill finally wearing thin at this backlash against her recommendation and the suggestion of a slight to her friend and mentor. Distantly, Will admires her tenacity, but he’s too hurt, tired and *annoyed* right now with the world to want to offer her any assistance. “But it doesn’t matter what *I* think. It’s important for people to feel comfortable with whoever it is that’s treating them, and if Will isn’t comfortable with Hannibal -”

“Maybe what’s needed here *is* something just a little uncomfortable,” says Jack, drawing himself up to full officious pomposity and exerting all the powers of his position, age, experience and dynamic over Will and Alana. Nodding along in perfect agreement with himself to make the world agree with him too, the oppressive peppery *press* of his presence pushing down on them. “We agreed Dr. Lecter was the less personal choice. You and Will have known each other for some time now, Dr. Bloom; said so yourself. Someone could accuse you of being too close to the situation to read it accurately.”

Alana looks at him in plain frustration. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this. Will -” She turns her gaze to Will again, searching for his support, but, after today, after *this,* Will has had enough.

Does it matter what he has to say? *Alana,* Will could make understand if he could just get a word in edgewise, but Jack has already made his mind up about *exactly* what Will needs, and saying anything to the contrary will just fall on deaf ears. *My way or the highway.*

Will had only consulted on the Shrike case as a favour (and because Jack wouldn't leave him alone). He's a teacher, and getting shoved around by the head of the BAU isn't in his job description. *The highway it is.*

"...Will?" Alana asks, seeing something shift in his expression. It's enough to get Jack's attention too.

Will dips his head to her slightly, as courteous an acknowledgement as he can manage at the moment, and then reaches up with his free hand to take off his glasses. Folds them against his chest and tucks them away in his grey blazer pocket. "I quit."

"Will-!" The outrage bursts out of Crawford like a greyhound out the gates, but Will has already turned his back on him, walking away, done with the race. He can apologise to Alana later. "Come *on,* Will!"

This time, Will doesn't stop.

October in Wolf Trap is a vast, open world of crispness and colour, the deciduous leaves slowly changing from greens to yellows, oranges and browns. The blue sky seems endless above the fields in the early mornings, and the grass underfoot is always damp with dew and the beginnings of the yearly frost - still too meagre to last long when the sun bursts over the horizon and burns away the last tendrils of the morning mist.

Will's seven dogs care nothing for the beauty of nature first thing save that they be let out into it *immediately* to pee on it. They barrel out the front door ahead of Will whilst he's still yawning in a furry stream of heavy paws and wagging tails, each dog determined to be the first to do their business and then sniff all around the house to see what small furry animals have been by during the night.

They find Alana standing in front of his house well before the sleep-addled Will does - some *guard* dogs they are, if they can't even bark to give him warning -, and Will has a few long, confused minutes wondering why all the dogs have veered left towards his driveway rather than immediately heading towards the tree in front of his house that's got their favourite trunk to piss on.

He gets his answer when a smiling Alana lifts her head from where she's bent over petting his pack, her blue-and-green tartan coat already picking up fur. The beta is a beautiful - if bewildering - sight standing in the sunlight with fall's colours blazing behind her, a white card box in her hands and Will's dogs shoving their seven dopey heads against the bare skin showing on her legs, the greedy, useless things begging for attention and whatever's in the box.

Will *tsst*s at them to get them to leave his guest alone and they depart in a thump of paws towards their toilet tree - unfortunately focusing all of Alana's attention on Will at the exact same moment he remembers he's standing stupidly on his front porch with bed-ruffled hair and sleep still in his eyes, wearing nothing but the thin t-shirt and old underpants he'd gone to bed in along with a pair of battered, well-chewed slippers.

Great.

Alana takes one - *long, thorough* - look at him from top to toe and back again, and lets her smile turn into the very beginnings of a grin. "Morning."

Will- Will is still waiting for his brain to properly start, too many contrasting details flying at him at once and tangling together in a snarl. He looks back at Alana and beyond her at his driveway: it's a long, noisy thing, lots of gravel, and he (and the dogs) usually hear cars coming from half a mile off. "I didn't hear you drive up."

"Hybrid," Alana explains, all rueful smile because she's been caught being sneaky. Not *purposefully* sneaky, but she has purpose; there's something there, conscience-adjacent, that's a little sheepish for being prodded. Why is she here? "Good car for stalking."

"Um," says Will, because a rather crisp breeze takes the opportunity to blow by him just then and remind him that *yes, you* are *standing in front of a beautiful woman wearing nothing but your old underwear*. He turns back towards his house with the hair on his arms and legs standing on end, his nipples - obviously (and embarrassingly so) - stiff under his t-shirt, wishing he had more arms to wrap around himself and sincerely hoping that his boxer shorts don't have any holes in them near his ass. "I'm compelled to go cover myself."

He can worry about Alana's motives *after* clothing happens.

Will is looking at Alana's throat rather than her face, but the angle of her chin strongly suggests her gaze has dropped. Her tone, amused, "I have brothers."

Nice, warm, ass-covering, *nipple-obscuring,* clothing.

"Think I'll put a robe on just the same." Will rubs at one elbow, thumb digging into the thinner flesh on the inside bend where the blood is closest to the surface. "Do you want a cup of coffee? And, more immediately -"

"Why am I here?" Alana asks for him, and Will gives one slight, slow nod of his head. To the best of his knowledge - and despite all his vague and wistful longing -, he doesn't think Alana has ever been alone in a room with him before. There was always at least one other person with them, if not a crowd. "It occurred to me that I owe you an apology for yesterday."

"Did it now."

Alana smiles at him again, a small, hopeful thing, and lifts the box in her hands in offering. "I'll take that coffee if you'll take my contrition. I brought muffins."

A few of the dogs perk up hopefully and amble a little closer to the house again at the sight of an interesting box being raised on high, but promptly amble on off again in a much more woebegone manner when Will gives them a warning look. “And here I thought bribery was against your good nature. Got any blueberry?”

“Wouldn’t show up here without it,” Alana assures him, so Will holds open his door for Alana to enter before him and points her on through to his kitchen, leaving the dogs outside to wear themselves out romping through the falling leaves.

One benefit to pretty much living out of one room means Will’s clothes are all at close hand. He kicks off his thoroughly dog-chewed slippers to pull on a pair of clean sweatpants and a warm blue sweater he’d only worn for a few hours the night before - before ceding to the inevitable and putting the slippers back on again, if only so he doesn’t have to sit down to put on a pair of socks whilst he has a guest waiting.

Since Alana has already found a seat at his kitchen table, coat hanging comfortably on the back of her chair, Will busies himself immediately with coaxing his ancient coffeemaker to life. He digs out some of his nicer ground coffee to feed the hissing, clicking and spluttering old beast in the hopes it won’t embarrass him too much in front of human company, yielding him caffeine in a timely manner that won’t strip off the inner stomach lining of his guest. (The dogs usually don’t care if Will loses a battle to the coffeemaker, though Ellie, Will’s little curly-haired mutt - that he strongly suspects is the result of the coupling of an ambitious mutt, possibly with some sort of bichon frise ancestry, with somebody’s *very* expensive, darling toy cavapoo -, barks indignantly three times and then goes and hides under Will’s bed if the coffeemaker gurgle-hisses at her when she’s not expecting it.)

Coffee begins to drip down into the waiting pot so Will shuffles back to Alana, smothering his jaw-cracking yawn with one arm and leaning on the table beside her. She has the grace to look both apologetic and sympathetic; it *is* pretty early for a house-call.

“Thought I’d best come early before class. I tried calling ahead, but your phone was off.”

Honestly, the phone ringing and shattering the morning quiet probably would have been the more annoying option. But Will had switched his cell off after reaching his house the night before after one irritating call too many disturbing his drive home, and he’s not sure if Alana *has* his landline number.

“Jack’s been calling since yesterday.”

Alana makes a soft, careful little *ah* that is both an acknowledgement of Will’s words and an awkward confession that she doesn’t yet know how to respond to them.

Perhaps a little meanly, Will lets her stew in it, sleepily enjoying the smell of coffee rising ever more strongly in the air, the sounds of his dogs running around gleefully outside and the wind in the branches of the trees on his land. He’d had the usual scant few hours sleep the night before, haunted by visions of ghosts and gore, but this? Now? It feels a little bit like peace.

“We talked over you yesterday,” Alana says at last, twisting her fingers together on the table in front of her but bravely forging on ahead. “I can’t and won’t speak for Jack, but I’m sorry for my part in it. It was unspeakably rude.”

In the kitchen, the coffeemaker lets out a particularly loud and curmudgeonly gurgle: an announcement of its task near-done. Will is glad to take the distraction it offers, heading back into the kitchen to pour them both a mug straight from the pot. “I don’t think we’ve ever been in a room alone together. Have we?”

“I haven’t noticed. Have we?” Alana’s lying, the careful, cheerful nonchalance in her voice spread too thick and uneven even when Will isn’t looking at her directly. Will lets it go, topping up her cup with a generous helping of milk and sugar before taking their drinks back to the table. “Stop trying to change the subject.”

Pots and kettles, unsubtlety used to call out unsubtlety. Alana likes her coffee sweet and creamy, but Will most often takes his strong, bitter and black.

“You were coming from a place of care,” says Will, and takes a seat to push Alana her drink across the tabletop, his own mug hot against his knuckles. With the ghost of a smile, he adds, “I was rude as well.”

Alana very kindly doesn’t point out that *rude* is Will’s assumed default state of being, though he’s usually nice to her.

It isn’t very hard to be nice to Alana. Most of the time.

Steam rises between them. Through it, Will can still see Alana’s face twisted up in regret - her heart is too good for this. She reaches out with her hand, fingers reaching across the table towards him. “Despite my best efforts, you were ambushed.”

Will forgives her, letting the warmth of her presence thaw his indignation like the sun on the frosty plains outside. There’s still mud left behind, but mud’s not all bad. (Will’s dogs love mud. Unfortunately, only about half of them also love bathtime.) He reaches back, just enough, fingertips grazing against the soft smoothness of the back of Alana’s hand. “Apology accepted.”

Alana smiles again, relief and sincere happiness evident in its curve, and takes her hand back so she can reach for her cardboard box on the table between them, lifting its lid and turning it around to cheerfully present its contents to Will for first dibs. “Then I must pay my dues. Blueberry, cranberry and almond, and peach cobbler: pick your poison.”

The nine muffins in the box - large, beautifully baked things bursting from the confines of their cases and studded with the bright colours of their ingredients - look great and smell delicious, and Will’s stomach rumbles in anticipation at the sight of them. His mind, however, can’t help but forlornly noting that he’d rather throw away all the muffins for the chance of picking the woman presenting them to him instead: for Will, the loveliest poison at the table.

There are words to describe omegas who fall in love with female betas when there's no alpha in sight to join the both of them, and the nicest ones mean *delusional.*

In the perfect cookie-cutter world directly out of some obscenely sexist 50s guide for the model house-omega, omegas should end up in one of only two kinds of romantic and sexual relationships. In the first, the omega is the perfect, smiling, doting mate of an alpha. The omega cooks and cleans the home whilst the alpha spends the day at work, and has the dinner on the table for their mate coming in, their clothes off and ass up on the bed the very moment their alpha wants to shove their knot into a warm wet hole. In due course, the omega proudly presents their virile alpha mate with the first of many armfuls of squalling babe, and then proceeds to be the perfect picture of motherhood by keeping the child out of sight and hearing until such a time that the alpha feels it necessary to have a bonding moment with their offspring. Repeat *ad nauseum.*

The second relationship deemed generally acceptable for an omega is much like the first, except the alpha-omega couple is part of a triad with a - usually female, for breeding reasons - beta. Their pictures in the 50s guide are Americana Holy Family-esque, sparkling white teeth, spotless clothes, and fabulously coiffed hair. In this relationship there are *two* people to go out and work, and the alpha has two wet holes to choose from at night. Two mothers to rear the children and give them a truly balanced upbringing whilst keeping the house clean, the chores done and the alpha happy.

Alphas, of course, in this stereotypical Stepford world, only mate with an omega, or an omega and a beta.

Betas mate betas, male with female in a pair, or an alpha and an omega in a threesome.

Basely, it comes down to breeding in the end, however theoretical conception might be. Breeding couples and triads, with a bias given for an individual alpha's preferences. Always. Any other kind of relationship is thought to be *unbalanced.*

Times have changed of course, and now, any couple can legally mate and marry, but still the alpha-omega and beta-beta relationship ideals are prized to the point where it's depressing. Presumed as the norm.

Will can never give Alana a child carrying both their genes, nor she him. Not even theoretically, ignoring factors like sperm and egg count and reproductive health. For that, many would consider them an illogical pairing, with attitudes ranging from ambivalence to confusion to outright disgust. Completely ignoring the fact Will and Alana might not *want* children at all. Completely ignoring all the pleasure and happiness the two of them could give each other.

All the pleasure and happiness Will dreams of giving Alana. There's a soft secret wish caught behind his eyelashes when he closes them, hazy with longing: sunlight and blue sky, the wind in the trees and the burbling of his stream. Somewhere the dogs are barking playfully and Alana's laughter comes from Will's side, his hand in her warm hand and her smooth white neck beneath Will's mouth, the world smelling of sunshine and water and Alana's sweet violet flower perfume.

Will's not asked her opinion about children, but, if Alana wanted them, there are plenty of sperm donors out there, and either of them could carry. Or there's fostering and adoption. Alana seems to him the sort who'd love to adopt if she had the time and ability, giving love and a home to children who need them. Little hopeful grabbing hands and grubby cheeks to add to the dream, the gleeful shrieks of toddlers being bowled over by wet canine kisses, or the quiet beat of music on a teenager's phone, showing off the latest track by their favourite artist. It's a flexible dream, with golden, glowing walls made to gently encompass the hopes of more than Will alone. One day.

Will takes a blueberry muffin.

"About yesterday…" Alana says hesitantly, deliberately waiting until after Will has just taken his first bite. "...Have you thought any more about the psychological evaluation?"

Will hadn't thought she'd let it go, but he'd been hoping she'd at least wait until *after* their first cake.

Refusing to rush, Will chews at his normal pace. It's a decent blueberry muffin, though he's had better, but wonderful for the fact he neither had to bake nor buy it himself. Swallows. "Wouldn't've thought it needed thinking about further. It's not required if I'm not working in the field any more."

"Then you meant it about quitting?"

Yesterday, Will had meant a lot of things. If he still means them all *today* is another matter entirely. His… *gift* makes him inclined to meet kindness with kindness, aggression with aggression, and Jack shoving all his decisions about Will's wellbeing at Will with such a heavy blast of domineering pheromones had just made Will reflect and respond in kind, digging his heels in and shoving back. In the light of a new day, however, Will just hasn't decided if he's still invested in defending that particular trench on the battlefield.

So he deflects. "Nothing to really quit, was there? Jack asked me to consult on a case, and I consulted. Job done." Another chunk of muffin disappears in one defiant gooey bite.

"You did a lot more than just *consult,* Will," Alana says, quiet but firm. Drawing a distinction between Will's special agent badge and gun, and a consultant's pass. "You closed the case. And the things you saw -"

"You mean," Will corrects her, "the things I *did.*"

"Those too," Alana says, more quietly yet. "They can take a toll on the head and the heart."

Will looks down at his muffin, and is immediately glad he hadn't picked out one of the cranberry and almond ones first instead. The blueberries inside, still fresh, have oozed their purple-blue colour out into the cake around them - something alien, bleeding. Thank God, not red. "I think my heart's used to taking a bit of a beating by now, Dr. Bloom."

"Doesn't mean it - and the rest of you - couldn't do with a bit of a pick-me-up," says Alana, and finally swivels the muffin-box back around so she can take one. A peach cobbler - the

brown sugar dusted across the surface of the muffin glitters hard in the sunlight. “I think you should go talk to Hannibal, Will. Whether you go for a psych eval or not. Hannibal’s good at what he does,” oh, is he *ever,* “and I think it’d do *you* good to talk about what happened during the case, with someone who went through it with you. Process things *outside* of your head for a change, so they don’t fester up inside.”

Alana’s really determinedly launching herself into this one, isn’t she? Distantly, Will is touched by her care, even whilst the rest of him feels both hounded and confused by being cared for.

He sips his coffee, stalling. “The talking cure. You know it only works on the willing.”

“I don’t think you’re entirely *un*willing. You told Jack you quit, but you didn’t hand in your badge.” Will’s fingers tighten around his cup; he’d hoped to have that remain unnoticed for a little while, giving him time to sift through his thoughts. “You want to help. It’s understandable, Will.”

“You don’t think I should be out in the field.”

“No,” Alana agrees, carefully shredding her muffin into pieces, “but I think if there’s even a small part of you that wants to help people by being out in the field again, now Jack has opened the door for you, you’ll go out there again anyway. And when you do, *if* you do, I want it to be on your terms and *not* because somebody pressured you into doing it. I want you to get the support you need. What Jack needs, I’m not as concerned about.”

Will smiles, his mind offering him a quick flash of thought: Jack’s grim bulldog being held off by Alana’s staunch swan. Two different kinds of strength.

“I don’t want to get in the middle of you and Jack,” Alana says, looking swiftly around the room as though Jack might be listening to their conversation before glancing up at Will with her offer, “but if I can be helpful to you as a buffer…”

Will- Will likes the idea of her offer, likes this way Alana would spend more time in his life. “Ah, I- I like you as a buffer.” Will’s gaze flickers to Alana’s then, for a moment, letting her see the wry crook of his mouth. “I also like the way you rattle Jack. He respects you too much to yell at you, no matter how much he wants to.”

Alana returns his smile. “And I take advantage of that.”

Will tilts his chin, amused - *you said it, not me* - and they share a conspirators’ grin. “*Don’t* let Jack Crawford make you doubt yourself.”

“Likewise. Don’t cut your nose off just to spite your face? It’s a nice nose.”

“Thank you. I take it with me everywhere and yet it rarely receives such compliments.”

Alana laughs at his teasing candour, a quick thrill of warmth making itself at home in Will’s ribcage and settling down to roost. It’s good to have another human voice inside his home,

playful words and light feelings soaking into the walls and wooden floors so that the house will still echo with them after Alana has gone.

They finish their individual muffins and coffee, and then Alana pours them another cup as Will divides up kibble and a home-cooked mix in the dogs' bowls before calling the seven furry idiots back indoors again for their - overdue - breakfast. Hopefully, the longer morning romp outside will have tired them out, encouraging them to nap during the rest of the day whilst Will is out rather than getting up to mischief due to lingering excitement about a new person having come inside the house. Alana's beta scent isn't new to them - Will has come home with it carried on his clothes before -, but it's never been so concentrated for them before.

"You know," Alana says almost idly, bumping Will's elbow as the two of them make their way back to the table, the cacophony of seven dogs tucking into their food as though they were fed last week rather than last night in the background, "you smell like your house."

"I," says Will. Closes his mouth again as he considers that, and Alana's small smile. Tries again. "...I genuinely can't tell if that's an insult or not. The dogs?"

Alana laughs again, plopping herself back down into her seat from earlier with a familiarity that only improves Will's good mood. "At last, a secret I can keep from you! And not the dogs. Well - *yes,* you sometimes smell of dogs, because you have *seven dogs,* but, I mean, your normal scent. Before you put on your aftershave. You smell like *this*." She gestures expansively at the sun-soaked table Will is once more leaning on beside her: their mugs of her coffee, and the box of muffins.

"...Muffins?" Will asks, unsure what his face is doing at that description. He's heard stranger and *worse* comparisons, but usually not from people he's so heavily attracted to. "I suppose that beats the cracker joke."

Alana mimes swatting at him in reproach, although she's distracted before making any contact by Max trotting through from the kitchen and laying his head adoringly in her lap. He does it to all the women he meets; he's a big hit at the vet's because of it, and usually scores an extra treat for all his utter shamelessness.

Alana caves as well, rubbing Max's soft floppy ears and telling him what a lovely boy he is.

Will knows when he's been beaten, and there's no way he's going to be receiving any petting when his competition has big soft border collie eyes. Dogs make *terrible* wingmen.

At least Alana hasn't *entirely* forgotten Will; she looks up at him, smiling, with her hands still buried in Max's fur. "You smell like fresh, clean air, Will, and lots of it. The trees in the woods around here, that you can smell on the breeze. And something like- like…" She grasps for words to describe the thought clearly hanging in her mind - but loses them all completely when Jack-the-dog (a title that became necessary after Will deepened his acquaintanceship with Jack-the-human Crawford) and Harley come racing out of the kitchen after their missing brother, spot all the love and attention being heaped upon Max, and immediately decide they want some of that as well. Alana gives up spectacularly as she reaches out to pet them too, laughing, "Okay, *yes!* Like coffee and muffins. Warm."

Good things. Alana associates Will's scent with good things, warm things - a compliment to anyone, but being told someone likes their scent tends to give omegas an extra swoop of pleased delight.

Will is not immune. He grins at Alana's woes trying to pet three dogs at once, reaching back behind him blindly for the box of muffins and grabbing another one for himself. It's another peach cobbler by the summer-sweet smell of it, the crunch of the sugar on the crust and juicy chunks of orange-yellow fruit inside unmistakable against Will's teeth and tongue.

"Good?" Alana asks, pleased at Will's obvious pleasure.

"Good," Will agrees, after swallowing his mouthful. Turning the muffin in his hands to investigate its insides, watching the sugar on it sparkle, before huffing out a brief laugh. There are much worse things to remind people of. "...I suppose this counts as cannibalism?"

Chapter End Notes

Life sucks when all you want is the pretty lady to ask you out, and instead you get to put up with your overbearing boss trying to send you for a psychiatric evaluation like it's the naughty chair. Muffins don't make everything better or heal your heartache, but I'd rather be in a shit situation with a delicious muffin than be in the same situation without one.

Bouchée: (mouthful) A small puff pastry case with a savoury filling, often creamed, usually served as an hors d'oeuvre.

Large chunks of dialogue were taken or adapted from *Amuse-Bouche* and *Potage* (and their scripts) this chapter. I'm trying not to have so much straight from the show all at once, but some repetition's important for clarifying what's happening differently here. There's much less of it as we further diverge and head for panicking pregnancy land.

I'm gonna be frank with you: there are no recipes for the muffins because I just googled 'good places to get muffins in Baltimore' and used the (sweet) muffins people recommended in their reviews. And I absolutely refuse to look up recipes, because the recs made me hungry enough. *Peach cobbler muffins*. I'm jealous. And hungry. ;w;

canard

Chapter Summary

Hannibal encourages complicity, Beverly offers bribery, and Will tries remote consultancy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Many omegas, when feeling threatened or unsure in a new environment, will instinctively find and place themselves in an area reminiscent of their nest: dim, covered, and surrounded by soft things. Their backs go to the wall so that they can see everything approaching them and nothing can sneak up behind them - though such actions leave them no escape should their defences be breached, and frequently with nothing to defend themselves save the wits they had just immediately thrown over for instinct.

Unlike many of Hannibal's omega patients who tend to duck their heads and disappear into the shadows under the mezzanine when they enter his vast office for the first time, Will's instincts take him to the heights. Though he had hardly hurried there, Will had left his bag and already been at the foot of the wooden ladder by the time Hannibal had finished shutting the door after welcoming Will inside, halfway up the ladder before Hannibal had turned around again and taken two steps back into the room.

Up on the mezzanine, Will has the higher ground in the office and much of the tactical advantage with it: a far superior position than many of his dynamic would unthinkingly choose. The only access to the mezzanine is by the ladder in the office or by the second-floor door on the opposite wall - which Hannibal cannot get to from the other side without leaving the room and letting Will out of his sight, giving Will plenty of time to evade him using another route. Will still has his back to the wall like his more stereotypical omega kin, yes, but on the mezzanine he also has two different means of escape at his disposal (provided Will does not count leaping over the balcony's balustrade a viable option as well) and three walls' worth of heavy book-and-curio-shaped projectiles to use in case of attack.

Rather taken with Will's show of fierce, instinctive intelligence - despite how it now aims to give him a crick in the neck -, Hannibal has no plans of inducing Will to attack him at this point in time (though he'd be quite willing to sacrifice the safety of his possessions for the experience). The mezzanine is exposed enough that Hannibal can easily keep track of Will's position by scent and sight, though the details of his expression are lamentably lost to the distance between them.

It is a loss significant enough that Hannibal wishes Will would come down the ladder again, closer to him, but not so much that Hannibal desires to force Will's hand by following him up

to the mezzanine. Or asking Will to come and join him down on the office floor. Brute force often damages or destroys that which it captures; sweeter is the prize that has been coaxed into pliancy and walks into the cage of its own accord. Hannibal has had a taste of his quarry already and is more than willing to put in the effort for a prize as fascinating as Will Graham: a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, as the saying goes, but what dull creature would keep a flock of tame pigeons when the opportunity is extended to catch the wild firebird? Even if all that is obtained from the attempt is but a single feather - how *brilliant* that feather!

Will makes a fine firebird to entice. He is a creature both beautiful and dangerous with a prophet's tongue, offering blessings to law enforcement with his insight even whilst, at the same time, pointing the way to a criminal's doom.

Will has the infamously unfriendly nature of the firebird too; he seems quite determined to ignore Hannibal below him on the office floor, drifting along the lines of Hannibal's bookshelves with a nonchalantly detached air. Fascinating, infuriating thing, showing no care for the company of princes.

So Hannibal, busying his hands with tidying up his desk, decides to throw him the lure of a golden apple in the hopes his firebird will sing.

"Jack Crawford asked me to perform your psych eval. You didn't tell him about us."

Will bites, turning from the shelves to pour down scornful wrath. "Obviously, *you* didn't tell him either."

"No," Hannibal agrees placidly, and looks up at him, this wild thing, perched deliberately just out of reach. "I am not one to - how is it they put it? - kiss and tell."

Will twitches beautifully. Hannibal cannot see the set of his jaw from the floor, but the stress of it tightens the line of Will's shoulders, spreads stiffness down his neck and back. It had been a delight to relieve him of that tension, unspooling Will to something languorous in bed.

"We never clarified what our response should be for this kind of situation, and it seemed rude for me to divulge the details of our private affairs with others before discussing it with you first."

Hannibal hadn't had any plans to tell Jack Crawford anything of his interactions with Will *regardless* of politeness. He had been far too curious to hear how *Will* might describe them to his superior, especially when Will had made it so plainly clear he'd machinated as much as Hannibal had to get them both into bed. The subsequent phonecalls from both Alana Bloom and Crawford, stating that the eval would be dependent upon Will getting in touch and confirming an appointment, and Will calling a few days later to arrange this evening's appointment, had only piqued Hannibal's curiosity further.

Will's response is clipped. "There was no prior need for clarification because I never expected a situation to arise where we'd need to explicitly divulge *anything*."

"Alas," Hannibal says mildly.

"*Alas,*" Will says much more bitterly and turns back to the books with dismissive swiftness, running his hand lightly along their spines.

Hannibal isn't certain if Will has noticed that he's scent-marking as he goes, the trace oils at his wrist and fingertips leaving his scent on everything they brush against, claiming unconscious ownership of the space around him. *Hannibal's* space.

Hannibal can smell him from the floor. The truly *awful* cologne Will must douse himself with every morning has almost faded away by this point in the evening, allowing Will's natural scent to gradually emerge and fill the air around him: fresh ozone, sweet-spicy cardamom, and smoky pine.

It's the same mouth-watering scent that still lingers, ghost-like, in Hannibal's bed. It's been almost a week and a half; Hannibal should - and would, usually - have changed his bed linen by now, especially after mounting an omega there so thoroughly, but he finds himself enjoying the smell of Will that still barely clings to his sheets, cotton rubbing the leftover scent of the omega's pheromones and slick onto his skin when Hannibal sleeps in his bed at night.

When Hannibal closes his eyes, he can clearly see the omega behind the lids, Will already amongst the most vivid of those things whose details Hannibal has captured to place within the vaulted walls of his Mind Palace. Hannibal had recorded something there of Will already before mounting him, building an airy marble room for the omega sun-drenched in the light of fall. Within it lies the memory of a blood-spattered face and trembling, blood-smeared hands, art in motion. The scents of fear, panic, iron and cordite mingled in the air. A shabby motel breakfast table, a thermos of coffee still steaming, plates and bowls laden with protein scramble made with eggs and handmade sausages. The biting echo of Will's voice, sharp truths dropped like diamonds from an arcuate mouth.

But now… now, Hannibal has added to the room the stormy, ever-changing grey-blue of Will Graham's eyes and their guarded expression, the bleed-out of gold in the iris responding to chemical changes within Will's body, signalling Will's state of heightened emotion: fear, anger, *lust*. The surprisingly soft curls of Will's hair, darkened to near black at the roots with sweat, spread out in a messy halo on the pillows of Hannibal's bed. The imprint of the rougher skin of Will's hands, the rust of Hannibal's blood under Will's nails and the flavour of it in his mouth. How Will's arousal tastes like cardamom and brown sugar and smoke, potently sweet at the scent glands of his wrists and throat, at the hot throb of Will's pulse. Something intoxicating. Dangerous. Vital. Mixed with lavender and amber and spice, Hannibal's body-wash and colognes.

In a gallery of statues, Hannibal memorialises how Will's blush spreads like the slow drip of blood into a pool of milk. How Will's drowsy mouth is the same petal-pink as his nipples and dripping cock, as the pretty hole that had parted for Hannibal's fingers and seeped slippery shining slick over the soft curves of Will's ass, between strong thighs that had gripped Hannibal's hips like a vice then trembled finely in post-coital bliss. The way Will's gaze had so stubbornly, determinedly slid away from Hannibal's even when Hannibal had bent over him to enclose it, and how Will had been demanding of his own pleasure all the same. The heat and exquisite tightness of his muscles around Hannibal's cock, and the shudder of his

orgasm. Orgasms. Each tempting bump of Will's spine, another hill for Hannibal to smooth his hand across, sheets twisted around their legs.

When the wind blows gently, the room sounds with conversation: Will's thoughts, Will's words, Will's being, a different moment to step to every time as Hannibal moves from breeze to breeze in this Room of Will at his leisure. The roughness of Will's laughter, startled out of the long pale line of his throat like wild geese in winter spooked by the crack of a hunter's gun, and the low visceral purr of his pleasure, meat Hannibal had cooked and provided for him fresh on his tongue. The rhythm of his heartbeat when excited and at rest. The petulant *slam* of a Quantico office door.

The collection Hannibal has already gathered is staggering, dizzying in its breadth and depth and sensory wonder, but both architecture and furnishings feel, to him, like a work in progress, barely capturing even a drop of Will Graham's true essence. Hannibal wants to see it all again, and verify its truth. Note its differences. Hannibal wants to hear, see, smell, taste, touch and *experience* Will Graham in all the different, changing times and lights: lit by only the moon's silver, in the paler glow of morning, in the *effets de soir.* Their first meetings have merely been the *imprimatura* upon which Hannibal may now paint successive layers, the raw colour of their base made of earthiness, hunger and blood. It will show, even in the - one day - finished piece.

There is no action in this world at this moment that Hannibal does not wish to do to and/or with Will Graham, and the sheer *potential* of it all is like a flood after a decade's long drought. Hannibal must tread carefully through the waters lest he lose his footing and the rush sweeps him away.

"Have you spoken to Alana recently?" Will inquires, pausing in his drifting to look back over his shoulder at Hannibal.

"Not for a few days, no." Hannibal's evenings have been too busy lately to have Alana over for dinner, his time caught up with new art exhibitions, two concerts, and his own artistic endeavours. "Is there something you'd hoped she might have told me?"

Will's expression flickers into something almost defiant, like a little boy defending a decision he doesn't expect approval for but wants all the same. "I told Jack that I didn't need a psych eval because I quit."

If Jack Crawford has allowed Will Graham's keenly insightful mind to escape his service, he's a greater and blinder fool than Hannibal had originally given him credit for.

Hannibal approves of Will's defiance in the face of Jack's no doubt blatant manoeuvrings, but Will's decision dismays him. Hannibal's direct access to information about the FBI's investigations currently comes through and/or because of Will, and the loss of such useful information straight from the horse's mouth, barely a few scant weeks after Hannibal had first begun to receive it, would be something of a blow. Adding insult to injury, Will's true potential is *wasted* when used only in a lecture hall, his clever mind handed only a toddler's nine-piece jigsaw to assemble rather than crime scene masterpieces of a thousand moving parts and more.

Worse *yet,* removing Will from the stress of active fieldwork would cool the heat from the forge testing and reforming Will's metal. The blade of Will's person is dazzlingly unique but still much duller than Hannibal suspects it could be: a master's touch is required to refold the pure dark steel at Will's core, stripping out the impurities of society's banal limitations and polishing Will's edge to smith a weapon suitable for legends.

"I'm sensing a 'but'?" Hannibal asks, seeing the hesitance in Will's hand still hovering over his bookshelves.

The quandary: to lean against the wood for support, or turn around to place his weight on the mezzanine railing?

"...But I haven't handed in my gun or badge yet," Will yields in confession, and turns. Choosing to continue his unconscious search for guidance, for validation.

"I see."

"Alana thinks it's because I still want to be out in the field," Will continues, still pushing for Hannibal's opinion.

Hannibal tilts his head, curious now. "Do you?"

"Once, being a field agent was *all* I wanted. They head-hunted me for work in the labs after I got my graduate degree, said it was a good boost to my application to the Academy. And it was. But I failed screening." Too moral - or his raw talent too unhoned - to fake it. Emotionally honest: Hannibal can track the feelings flying across Will's features as easily as a hawk that's spotted an unsuspecting vole.

"And yet they clearly realised you were too valuable to let go entirely," Hannibal says, and wishes, for a brief moment, that he'd been a fly on the wall for the discussion around *that* particular hiring decision.

Will being too unstable to be an agent had surely worked against him in gaining his position at the FBI Academy, but balancing that out had been a mind of some renown. Will's prior work in the FBI laboratories (where he had no doubt been harangued for his unique insight by active field agents) would have been a recommendation in itself, but his résumé also contains that which had no doubt ranked high amongst the reasons Will had been head-hunted by the bureau in the first place: Will's sky-high record for closing cases previously thought impossible in the NOPD, and his respectable contributions to wider academia.

Will has more than a few published papers under his belt, all of them more than worth the time Hannibal had spent reading them (a comment he wishes he could make with more regularity when doomed with only the fatuous dross regularly deposited into the world by the digestive systems of some of his *esteemed* colleagues to read, excrement proudly presented in the guise of contributions to academic thought). Will's monologue, *On Determining Time of Death by Insect Activity,* is considered the standard in the field of forensic entomology; despite Mant and Nuorteva in the many volumes of Tedechi's *Forensic Science* including more images and a table for invasion waves in their take on the subject, Hannibal had found

Will's paper to be the more precise and detailed of the two, with a crisper tone: an illuminating - and helpfully instructive - read.

Will's face twists in a grimace, self-deprecation at its core. "Too crazy to be an agent, but hey, why don't you come work at the Academy and teach the nice sane people what *not* to do?"

"You were sane enough to catch the Shrike."

"Do you *need* to be sane to do something like that?" Will asks somewhat wryly. "I wasn't told that was a requirement."

No, Jack Crawford probably kept the list of requirements for retaining Will's services rather low.

"I'm sure you've heard the phrase: 'the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing'?" Hannibal takes a careful seat on the corner of his desk with legs partly spread, deliberately crafting a more casual atmosphere to encourage an open airing of thoughts and grievances. For someone who sees so much, Will can be quite reserved with his speech at times - most likely, too used to having it ridiculed, despised or ignored. "Organisations as large as the FBI often have so many hands up and down the chain of command that no-one can keep track of them all, and eventually, hypocrisy finds the gaping maw being hidden by slack fingers and slides down the throat into the belly of the beast."

Will responds beautifully to subtle suggestion, whistling and leaning more of his weight on the mezzanine railing, apparently impressed at Hannibal's rather withering description. "Oh, Dr. Lecter, *ouch.* If I were a real agent, I could be quite hurt on the bureau's behalf there."

"A special agent *is* a real agent, Will," Hannibal replies, as insincerely earnest as he can be just to provoke the flash of his guest's rare grin. More thoughtfully, to coax Will into giving it some thought, "Or so I have been informed."

Will's grin lives a brief life, the longest part of its existence spent in its fading away. "...I don't know if I want to continue being a special agent. I mean, I *do;* there'll always be some part of me that wants to be a field agent, because I could do so much good and I *know* I'm good at what I do, but. This work will use me up, and people like Jack will *help* it use me up to get the results they need. And then they'll scrape up and send whatever's left of me at the end for another psych eval."

It doesn't have to be that way, of course. There is more than enough room that a home could be made in the middle ground, where Jack's desires, Alana's worries, and Will's own dreams could meet harmoniously. Where Will could be supported by his employer, colleagues, friends, psychiatrist and, perhaps, lover, to do the work that his soul has been educated by society to believe is just, moral and right. Solve cases. Catch bad guys.

Live the insultingly bland existence of a master professional's tool in the grasp of an incompetent, that *beautiful* mind of his dulled by by improper handling.

"Then," Hannibal gently inquires, "the question here must become: do you knowingly consent to being so flagrantly used?"

Will doesn't reply, considering some mixture of the question and Hannibal keenly, sensing something of the depths lurking below the words which float atop a deep dark pool. He's quick - a fact Hannibal finds both dangerous and delightful -, and so blatant manipulation only irritates him. Their time in bed together had only strained at those moments when Will had gotten weary of Hannibal too obviously testing him, though Will's patience probably *had* been extended by the post-climatic gifts of *la petite mort.*

It matters little. Whether Will reads the true intent behind Hannibal's query or not, the question and its implications will, regardless, still sink into the porous puzzle of his mind, a droplet spreading endless ripples in a wind-stirred lake. *The FBI is ill-using you. Jack Crawford and his ilk will use you up and wear you out.*

Will pushes off the railing and starts walking again, hands stuffed in his pockets. "Regardless, Jack thinks I need therapy. Alana didn't say it in as many words, but she really wanted me to talk to you as well."

"Undoubtedly," Hannibal agrees, "she has your best interests at heart. But I would say what you need is a way out of dark places when Jack sends you there."

"Last time he sent me into a dark place I brought something back."

"A surrogate daughter?" Hannibal's gaze is lowered for a moment as he stands once more, but he hears the moment when Will, struck, pauses half a beat in his steps before resuming his regular pace. "You saved Abigail Hobbs' life. You also orphaned her. It comes with certain emotional obligations, regardless of empathy disorders."

Will's voice sharpens. "You were there. You saved her life too. Do *you* feel obligated?"

"Yes," Hannibal admits plainly, watching the force of his confession as it strips all the edges off Will's defences. Will had been expecting a denial or a deflection, and receiving honesty instead rattles him. "I feel a staggering amount of obligation. I feel responsibility. I've fantasised about scenarios where my actions may have allowed a different fate for Abigail Hobbs."

Will looks at him for a beat longer, then nods rather jerkily and looks away. "Jack thinks Abigail Hobbs helped her dad kill those girls."

Ah. For all he can be laughably blind at times, Jack Crawford had not gained his seat at the helm of the BAU without staunch intelligence and a good nose for the truth.

Hannibal lets the silence settle for a long moment. Then, "How does that make you feel?"

"How does it make *you* feel?" Will snaps straight back at him, pettish, rounding a corner on the mezzanine and coming to an angry stop.

"I find it vulgar."

"Me too."

"And entirely possible."

Will wrenches into movement again, one hand flying out in dismissive disgust. “It’s not what happened.” His anger alters his scent, favouring the ozone: a storm in a teacup.

“Jack will ask her when she wakes up,” Hannibal cautions him, fascinated by this defensive flare of Will’s fiery heart in protection of those he perceives innocent, “or he’ll have one of us ask her.”

“Is this therapy or a support group?”

Clever boy. Hannibal lets a thread of laughter colour his reply, utterly sincere as he lifts his face to Will on high. “It’s whatever you need it to be.”

Will stops walking again, his curiosity snared. Comes over to lean on the railing again, all to see if Hannibal is serious.

Hannibal is quite serious. “Speaking of…” He turns back to his desk, shifting a few of his folders until he can withdraw the paper he had prepared and set aside there earlier, lifting it aloft to catch Will’s eye.

Will looks down at him more than a little suspiciously. “What’s that?”

“Your psychological evaluation, should you decide to go back out into the field and require it.” Hannibal walks closer to the wall where Will is, pleased to note Will, furrowed brow and all, sidles along the mezzanine railing to meet him halfway. Height between the floor and mezzanine level notwithstanding. “You’re totally functional and more or less sane. Well done.”

“...You just rubber-stamped me?”

“Yes. Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing he didn’t break you, and your future decisions can be made without the obstruction of any paperwork.”

The furrowed brow turns into a frown. “You can’t do that. And I can’t accept that.”

Hannibal had been expecting the backlash. There is almost always some sort of it when Hannibal extends an offer to those he favours that they don’t really want to refuse, pesky fears and morals waging war with their own desires and the temptingly easier path Hannibal is willing to guide them on.

Watching the struggle is half the reason Hannibal even offers this kind of assistance in the first place. The rest is simple curiosity about the outcome.

Though it *also* never hurts to bind a useful tool to one in complicity.

“As you wish.”

Will seems further annoyed by Hannibal’s placid acceptance of his refusal, bursting out with a frustrated, “Why would you even *offer* me that? That kind of breach in ethics could jeopardise *both* our jobs.”

Hannibal lowers his hand, evaluation with it. “Tell me, Will, have you spoken to anyone at all about our little *tête-à-tête*?”

Still rather disapproving, Will shakes his head. Hannibal didn’t think he would have; Will had escaped Hannibal’s house with the air of one flustered but satisfied, though not terribly proud of himself.

“Neither have I. If that were to continue, who is, then, to say that it didn’t happen *after* I did this evaluation for the bureau? Or at all?”

“Why would you take that risk?”

“Because I believe, at least in some small, strange and immeasurable way, we have an understanding of each other. In a world where it is very uncommon for those like us to find understanding.” Will looks somewhat startled at the firmness of Hannibal’s reply - is it so unusual for another to be so sure of him? “And I believe it would be a tragedy for you to be stifled in your endeavours because of a little red tape, your talents wasted.”

“You could give me a referral,” Will argues. Half-heartedly.

“I could,” Hannibal agrees, though he is entirely unwilling to allow another inferior psychiatrist the opportunity to take a peek into the mind of Will Graham - if they are even intelligent enough to get that far - if he can help it. “And you would have to suffer another stranger attempting to pry their way into the workings of your mind again, all for the possibility they could deem you too unstable for fieldwork at the end of it.”

Much like the story of your life so far, Will.

Hannibal waits a moment, to let that sink in. “I can help you, Will. If you ask me to.”

Will struggles. Hannibal can see him struggle, his desire for a simple, non-intrusive solution to his woes grappling with his morals like Herakles against the Nemean lion. Like the demigod, Will too will one day triumph over his lion and wear its pelt to warm him - or reveal himself to be nothing but another disappointing imposter, and perish by its claws.

Will shakes his head, though he is clearly still torn. “No. Not- not never, not yet, but not that way for now. Until I’ve decided if I even want to be back out in the field.”

Not yet is always better than not ever, and so Hannibal concedes with a gracious dip of his head that the day must be a leonine victory, though his Herakles is still alive to retreat and listen to advice from the heavens.

“Then I must wish you the best of luck with your decision. And Will,” Hannibal carefully files the psychological evaluation away again to keep the paper smooth and uncrumpled, “I do hope you know that the mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself and not the worst of someone else.”

There’s another long pause, and then Will, sounding truly confused, “If I really quit we might never talk again, and *that’s* what you want to end with?”

Looking up from his desk again, Hannibal offers him only an affable smile to read in response, an easy shrug. “We might never talk again, true. Or perhaps we might end up talking every day after this one.” Hannibal is strongly leaning towards the latter situation, and will influence events as best he can to achieve something like that outcome - though nothing is certain. Will, confusion and all, makes life so wonderfully, novelly, unpredictable. “*Do* you want to talk, Will?”

After their heated discussion in his lecture hall, Jack keeps out of Will’s way. Will appreciates the reprieve, though he suspects the move may be made less out of consideration and more out of the implicit understanding that if Will *really* wants to quit helping the BAU, *Will* is going to have to be the one who tracks Jack down and formally hands in his badge. It relies on a great deal of self-interest from both parties and a mutual unspoken agreement that neither side will go over the other party’s head to superiors, but the end result is a rather childish game of hide-and-seek: if Will can’t find Jack, Will can’t quit, and, in the meantime, Will might change his mind about quitting in the first place.

Beverly Katz, fibre analyst to the BAU and hide-and-seek onlooker extraordinaire, has no problems tactfully accepting the implicit whilst explicitly getting the results she wants, parking herself against the wall right outside Will’s classroom where Will can’t miss her when he walks out after his last morning lecture has finished.

“They must use up half the Academy budget in scent-deadening spray for your classroom, Graham,” Beverly says rather cheerfully in lieu of *hello,* Will coming to a stop just in front of her. Much like a burst pipe, there's no use in trying to ignore Beverly Katz. Whilst you pretend the leak isn't there, the flooding just gets worse. “You can smell the stifled longing from three corridors away.”

She’s not the first person to have made that comment or something like it, though overexposure to the scent means Will mostly filters it out these days. *Eau de Hot For Teacher,* as one guest lecturer had once wearily put it, another comparatively young omega man who had said the smell haunted his university lecture halls as well.

Will would prefer not to think about it. If he thinks about it, he may start *smelling* it again, and the scent *en masse* is about as attractive as a bag of old sweaty gym clothes that a frightened dog has peed on. “Beverly Katz. You’re a long way from home.”

Beverly just grins at him, pushing off the wall with her shoulders so she can stand upright again. “Occasionally I like to remind myself a world exists outside of the labs. Coincidentally, such reminders often overlap with the lunch run.” She waves the brown paper bag she had been dangling laconically from two fingers at him, letting it swing back and forth. “Also I came to bribe you into service. Bean-and-cheese burritos. Want one?”

Will has another class in the afternoon, and had just planned to do what he always does on those days when the paperwork isn't swamping him: head over to the Academy cafeteria to find the least unappetising thing there for lunch. Beverly's offer would save him a walk there, but - "Maybe I should ask you what you want from me before I sign away my soul."

"Can't begrudge a man wanting to read the fine print." Beverly shrugs, a quick rolling rise-fall of her shoulders that sends a waft of her relaxed alpha scent out into the air around her. Amber and smoky vanilla, with a sweet bright burst of rosy pink pepper: Beverly makes people feel instinctively at home, even tinged with the scent of the chemicals used in the lab she works in most of the time. "We've got a case downstairs going nowhere, and I figured it might help if you take a look. Mushrooms."

"You know, I told Jack I quit," says Will, adjusting the lay of the bag-strap on his shoulder and wondering just what sort of macabre nightmares his mind will conjure up for him that night if he chooses to oblige Beverly's request. He has an inkling; there have been whispers and horror stories floating about the Academy about the latest crime scene involving the BAU for a few days now, a row of corpses found in the woods, victims left as food for fungi and moulds.

"I *heard* that," Beverly says cajolingly, "but I *also* heard you've still got your badge. And Jack's deliberately not asking you for it."

It's amazing how well the FBI keeps a secret. *Amazing.*

Not.

"Is my desk bugged?" Will asks, only partially joking.

"The walls have ears," Beverly informs him in a solemn hush, before her usual grin peeks through. "And the floors, ceilings, and furniture like gossip."

That doesn't rule out the possibility that Will's desk is bugged. God bless the FBI, where paranoia comes free as a perk of employment. "Well I hope the furniture informed you that even if I *haven't* handed in my badge yet, Jack's decreed that I need a psych eval before I can go back out in the field again."

"Not asking you to go out in the field, am I? The morgue's in the basement." Beverly waggles her eyebrows dramatically, sure in her winning argument, and swaps the paper bag to her left hand so she can offer Will her right arm. "Come, Mstr. Graham, let me spirit you away into my lair of fluorescent lighting and formaldehyde. You get fed; no-one'll tell Jack, and we can pretend you were never there."

Will doesn't take her arm. But when Beverly *tsk*s at him and dips her hand inside her bag to offer him a foil-wrapped burrito instead, Will caves and accepts the food with a wry smile.

It can be troublesome, as an omega, taking something directly offered by an alpha. Especially when it's something fundamental like food or protection. It gives alphas an endorphin rush to *provide* for those in their care - and alphas, at least subconsciously, tend to categorise every omega close or closer to them than a friendly acquaintance as *in their care.*

Or, depending on the alpha's good nature, idealism, and general temperament, *especially* when the alpha in question is angling for a date, every identifiable omega in the nearby environment. An alpha is considered a piss-poor alpha if they stand back and allow an omega to suffer in their presence, knowingly or otherwise.

Honestly, it's basic human decency to not let *anyone* suffer needlessly, but gender and dynamics have always been dragged into things since the year dot.

Beverly, Will is pretty sure, isn't hitting on him, or even trying to stereotypically *provide* for him as an omega. But that doesn't stop her getting the ego-boost from Will accepting lunch direct from her hands, a quick flicker of pleased red decorating the rim of her iris.

Will sighs at her, deliberately dramatic. "And not a chaperone in sight. Ms. Katz, how scandalous."

"That's 'cause *you're* the chaperone. My esteemed colleagues are doing their Dumb and Dumber routine, and I need an alibi in case I feel the urge to throttle them."

It's good that Beverly's not asking for Will to stop her committing homicide, because Will's not sure if he even *could* best Beverly Katz in a close physical encounter. At least not without the element of surprise on his side, which would probably require the death of at least one of her labmates as a distraction. Beverly is in great shape, has seen a *lot* more time in the field recently than Will, and is known for being both a quick draw with her gun as well as an accurate shot.

Will waves his burrito. "What's to stop me just running away with this to my office to eat in peace? My door locks."

"I can and *will* tackle your pretty, faithless twink ass before you make it five yards," Beverly tells him cheerfully, which somehow makes the threat all the more believable.

"'Twink'?"

"Feel it. In your *heart.*" Will gives her an unimpressed look. Beverly is unperturbed, alpha confidence unflappable. "We have coffee."

"Terrible coffee."

"Terrible coffee, but it's *free.* I'll even fetch it for you."

Lunch in hand and the promise of free (terrible) coffee being brought to him are, combined, a lure too great to resist, much as Will begrudges admitting it. Teaching at the FBI Academy is lowering his standards dramatically. Next, he'll be putting out for peanuts.

He starts walking in the direction of the BAU labs, and unwraps his burrito to grumble around a mouthful. "At least *this* is edible."

Beverly falls in step with him, leaving the rest of the food in her bag. "I know, right? Good thing too - the morgue's all corpses and fungi at the moment, which has pretty much put us

all off everything Italian until at least next week, so we're all temporarily embracing anti-mushroom pescetarianism."

Swallowing, Will squints at his burrito. Black beans. Seasoned rice. Cheese. Onions. Shredded lettuce. Sauce. "This doesn't contain any fish though?"

"Yeah, Jimmy's been squeamish about the cafeteria seafood ever since a tuna sandwich from there gave him the runs."

Fair enough: Will usually doesn't touch the fish options in the cafeteria either, although his avoidance is based on the fact he has plenty of - fresher - fish at home that he had caught himself. But if the cafeteria food made Jimmy ill…

"You're really not convincing me I shouldn't've bought my own lunch."

"Too late, you started eating the bribe," Beverly says ruthlessly, and snorts when Will only *sighs* pointedly down at his burrito. It's ruined now. Sort of. Food is food, but now it's food associated with Jimmy Price's diarrhoea. "Oh, shut up and eat your fibre."

Will makes a rude noise at her from the back of his throat, but otherwise shuts up and eats his fibre. He's finished before they hit the elevators, balling up the foil wrap and tossing it in a nearby bin before the doors open to take them both down to the labs.

They end up in the break room - mostly because it's currently empty and so there's no-one to protest Will taking up a table by spreading the graphic contents of a case file across it, but also because it's right beside the coffee machine. And Jack usually doesn't stick his head in the break room unless everyone is pulling an all-nighter.

God, *Jack.* Will still doesn't know what he wants to do about working for Jack and the BAU, his thoughts spinning around and around like a macabre merry-go-round. He can't deny Jack has a point: Will is *good* at the work, and Will feels good saving lives, helping people, and bringing killers to justice. But the work… the work isn't good for *Will.* Not the impressions it leaves on his mind, and not the constant chip-chip-chipping away at his self-esteem when people look at him with doubt in their eyes, wondering if he's some kind of con artist making things up, wondering if he's stable enough to do the job, wondering if the next case he looks at will be the thing that really drives him insane.

In fact, the only person who has never looked at Will with some kind of fear or doubt in their eyes in the past month is *Dr. Lecter,* which *has* to be some kind of awful cosmic joke at Will's expense. Will had looked the beta - approximately - in the eye after they'd slept together and told Lecter that he'd basically used Lecter against himself, and Lecter had *still* invited Will to stay for dinner before pulling him back down into the bedsheets for another round of thorough fucking. Given Will leftovers to take home with him, and has now offered to put his neck on the line for Will, *with* Will, to give Will a psych eval, freeing Will to go back out into the field unfettered.

Because they have an understanding of each other, apparently.

According to Lecter.

Will *understands* that taking the psych eval from Lecter - and, subsequently, mutually agreeing to pretend the two of them had never fucked - would remove all of Will's leverage over the other man. Whilst frustrating (going to bed with Lecter was supposed to get *rid* of the beta), the realisation makes it a great deal easier for Will to trust Lecter's intentions with regards to his offer of assistance. Lecter gives the impression that he doesn't like having either his actions constrained by another party or leverage held over him by anyone, and so it's in his best interests as much as Will's that any bargain they strike between the two of them goes well.

Morally - and according to the terms of his employment -, Will should get a referral. But the psychiatrist Will would be referred to might not clear him for fieldwork. Because fieldwork will only make Will's nightmares worse -

"Will," Dr. Lecter's voice whispers across Will's thoughts, soft and relentless as the dappled sunshine in the photographs before him, light spread over fungus-ravaged corpses in their forest graves, *"I do hope you know that the mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself and not the worst of someone else."*

Fuck, Will's head hurts.

Beverly, having already hollered the arrival of lunch at the figures of Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller (and many, many slabs of corpses) as she passed the main lab she shares with the two men, goes about fulfilling her promise of coffee. Distracted by the images in front of him, the first Will really knows of it is when Beverly pushes a hot cup into his hand, the heat and weight startling him out of his wandering thoughts.

"Try not to let it poison you," Beverly advises him archly - whilst holding her own cup of the same brew -, only to gape when Will lifts the hot coffee straight to his mouth to take a large swallow. *"Fuck,* Graham - do you have an asbestos *tongue?*"

Will shrugs at her, enjoying the radiant heat as it slips down his throat. "Work the graveyard shift on the beat long enough, you'll drink any crap above lukewarm just to stay awake."

Not that anything, even temperature, ever improves the flavour. The high temperature of the coffee gives Will a few moments of respite before his tastebuds recover from their flash-scalding and register what kind of *swill* had just passed across them, sending an indignant message straight down to Will's stomach that it should join them in their protest, one brief queasy *lurch* in Will's abdomen that sends a grimace twisting across his face.

"God, has this actually gotten *worse* since the last time I was down here?"

Seemingly holding her own cup of coffee more for its heat than for having any plans to actually drink it, Beverly does her best not to look too relieved that Will's tastebuds still appear to be in functioning order (and/or that the omega beside her isn't some kind of alien in disguise). "Tell me it's any better in the teacher's lounge and I'll tell you you're a liar."

"I wouldn't know, haven't been there in a while." Off Beverly's inquiring look, Will explains: "Ericson keeps asking me out, and it's only gotten worse since I got back."

“Ericson, no, really? But he’s so- And you’re so-” Beverly pauses mid-gawk, catching sight of Will’s pointedly raised eyebrow and tactfully deciding not to finish her last sentence. She coughs, and retreats behind the rim of her cup to regather her social awareness. “Well, clearly you’re not interested.”

“Nope,” says Will, letting the *p* pop into a sigh before he takes another sip of coffee. “But he’s a single alpha; I’m a single omega, and, most importantly, we work at the same place. Obviously, we were meant to *be.*”

Ericson: Professor Clive Ericson. A good-natured older alpha, interesting when discussing his work on gangs and gang behaviour, but fairly dull otherwise and half in love with his vegetable garden of heirloom tomatoes. It’s not the first time Will has been hit on by a fellow professor, but Will’s not sure what to do about Ericson at the moment. Unlike Will’s students, Will can scent more than lust and casual yearning on the alpha when they interact; Ericson seems to be developing *feelings*, and has so far remained genially oblivious to Will’s attempts to both avoid him and gently let him down. If Will rebukes him more firmly, it could sour their working relationship - and Ericson is the more well-liked professor of the two of them, both amongst their colleagues and their students. Will would be seen as the injurious party, even in the unlikely event someone *doesn’t* maliciously suggest Will, as an omega, had led Ericson on.

“Doesn’t hurt you’re not bad-looking under all that… that,” Beverly says, waving her hand up and down in a vague gesture that Will assumes is meant to encompass his general person and/or presentation. Truly, a backhanded compliment, for which Will offers her a rather dry *thanks*. “He’s gotta have - what? At least 15 years on you? Wouldn’t matter if there was mutual attraction there, but Ericson’s punching a bit above his weight. I mean. He’s *nice.* He *is* nice, isn’t he?”

If Will possessed even one ounce of sexual attraction for Ericson, the age gap would be the exact *opposite* of a problem. As it is - “Nice, sure.”

“Just not…”

“Just not,” Will agrees, and drinks more of his coffee. His tastebuds have grudgingly adjusted to the awful taste and no longer try to make his entire digestive system rebel against him, internal organs shocked into submission by rapid repeated exposure.

Beverly whistles quietly - “Damning with faint praise.” - before falling into the social trap of mimicking her conversational partner - in this case, swallowing a mouthful of her own still-hot coffee.

Will fails to hide his grin at her disgusted face, tapping the tabletop beside them and the sheets of the gruesome case file spread across it. “Tell me about this case.”

Beverly does.

A group of boys out exploring the woods had found the worst kind of secret ‘garden’: a crop of seven corpses in a row of shallow graves, of mixed sex and dynamics, in various stages of decay with the bodies given over to rampantly-thriving wild moulds and fungi. A single arm

of each victim had been fixed in place above the surface of the earth like a mushroom's cap, with an intravenous line in each. Decomposition had been enthusiastically encouraged; digging the bodies up had revealed them all to be buried in high-nutrient compost - noticeable, as the surrounding earth in the forest had been clay-based. The victims' distinguishing features had been eaten away by the fungal growth, making it difficult to identify the dead and nearly impossible to tell how long they'd been in the ground.

Each of the victims had been buried alive with the intention of keeping them that way, at least for a little while. One of the 'corpses' had still been alive when the FBI had dug him up, just as ravaged as the luckier dead beside him, but had died en-route to the hospital. All of the victims had had their eyes, noses and mouths covered with duct tape, fitted with breathing tubes that connected to a single air supply system: a plastic tube sticking up out of the ground at the end of the 'garden', with an umbrella over it to keep off rain. Not very efficient, which meant it hadn't been a priority for their killer.

This unsub certainly isn't lazy, Will surmises, flicking through reports as Beverly speaks. It takes time and effort to kidnap seven people, transporting them out to the woods without anyone noticing and burying them all in a row. Filling the ground with high-grade fertiliser and waiting around to see a crop of fungi grow. Stashing a thirty gallon drum of pesticide in a hollow tree nearby to keep the 'garden' healthy, and setting a circle of small animal traps in the surrounding woods to prevent local wildlife digging up an easy meal.

A rusted Radio Flyer wagon found beside the pesticide, fertiliser in its trunk, explains how the unsub had transported his victims out to the woods, but there are still plenty of questions to be asked.

Will frowns down at the photographs on the table again, his eye caught by the images of the catheters in the victims' arms, the limbs and intravenous lines fixed in place with twine and sections of rebar. "What was in the lines?"

"Still waiting on the tests coming back," Beverly says apologetically. Sets down her coffee and goes to rummage in her half-forgotten bag for her own burrito, dark hair swinging about her face. Lunchtime waits for no constitution, however delicate. "It shouldn't be long, but. Watched pots, and all that."

Will *hm*s. "And there were no restraints present? They weren't bound? Nothing to stop them from crawling out?"

"Just dirt, and not a lot of it."

"Alive, but unable to move."

Unconscious, then. A garden of the sleeping and the dead.

Images of the crime scene already firmly fixed in mind, Will takes a slow, deep breath in to the count of four, exhaling the same, and closes his eyes. In the darkness there behind his lids a shining golden pendulum swings, *fwum, fwum,* to the steady rhythm of his heart. And there, beyond it -

The crime scene in reverse. The police and FBI presence disappears, tape, markers and body-bags are removed, agents and investigators vanishing back amongst the trees. The fungi spread across the forest floor shrinks, and the exhumed graves once more become a row of sack-covered arms - save the seventh grave, still yawning wide open and waiting to be filled with the victim who will live only long enough, quite unintentionally, to be raised from the earth again. The air is heavy with the filler scents of the forest around Wolf Trap, provided by Will's memory to match the scenery, and sweet, stinking, mulchy rot.

Fwum, fwum.

Will can feel the heft of a shovel in his hands, the weight of wet, pungent black dirt on the blade. Next to him is the Radio Flyer wagon from the case file, its trunk overflowing with the same fresh fertiliser he's moving, and at his feet is the shallow open grave. It's no longer empty; a naked man is lying there now on his back, his eyes closed to Will crouching down at his side, shoving an oxygen tube up his nose and taping it in place.

"I choose this man. I do not bind his arms or legs as I bury him in a shallow grave."

Covering the man's eyes and mouth with more tape, and tethering his arm to a piece of planted rebar. Catheter inserted and fixed in place.

"He is alive but will never be conscious again."

Fwum, fwum.

Will climbs up out of the grave, hand against its rim to brace himself. He has dark reddish clay under his nails, and, for a moment, it reminds Will of something, a stray fleeting half-thought that refuses to resolve itself. No matter. Shovel grabbed again, Will stands over his victim and begins to fill in the compost on top of him, shifting the dirt from the trunk of the wagon to the grave.

"He won't know he's dying. I don't need him to. This is my design."

Will turns away to get another shovelful of dirt - and when he looks back again, the edges of his victim flicker under the compost already heaped atop him, Garret Jacob Hobbs lying in the open grave where another body should be, staring up at Will accusingly.

Shock punches the air out of Will's chest and he jerks back from the grave-

Hot coffee sloshes over his hand, and Will hisses through his teeth.

"Careful," Beverly says sympathetically, and Will has to squeeze his eyes shut against the concern in her expression, stilling the nervous twitch of his forearm under the touch of her hand. "Did you burn yourself?"

The forest is gone. Will is back in the break room attached to the Quantico labs with Beverly Katz, the skin of his hand pink from the heat of his spilled coffee, dark spots of it on his shirtsleeve. The table in front of him is strewn with reports and photographs, words and pictures, pale corpses and vibrant fungi.

Will breathes out, in, and out again. The forest is gone from his nose, replaced by the scent of Beverly's amber and vanilla. "I'm fine. Thanks."

Beverly is interrupted before she can say anything else, Jimmy Price sweeping into the room and immediately zeroing in on the bag of food Beverly brought from the cafeteria.

"Ooo, food!"

"I told you about it at least ten minutes ago," Beverly complains, but moves away from Will to nudge the bag over into Price's grabbing hands, a half-eaten burrito still in her other hand. Alpha-providing again to another omega. Her own coffee has vanished. "This is why we don't get hot food."

"Advances in cheap disposal insulated packaging are being made every day," Price tells her primly, but turns his smile on Will where Will is busy drying his hand with a crumpled tissue from his pocket, coffee set down. Will's skin tingles as he scrubs at it, but he's avoided a bad burn. "Hello, stranger. You fly south for winter?"

Will bites back the unkind retort on the tip of his tongue about how the Quantico labs are hardly a seasonal migrator's paradise, saved by a rather grumpy-looking Brian Zeller coming up behind Price to pull a burrito out of the bag in the other man's grasp.

"Really showing your priorities there," he tells Price, picking at the foil wrapping. Food first, then guests.

"Oh, it's fine," says Will, because he actually often enjoys being overlooked when it means people aren't *asking* him things. "I'm not here."

"*Jack,*" Beverly stage-whispers, before taking another bite of her burrito.

"Invisible man routine, got it," says Price, cheery spirits undaunted. More loftily, to Zeller: "Few things take priority over an empty stomach."

"I think mine might be staying empty for a little while longer," Zeller says, finally noting the case file and its gruesome contents spread out over the table in front of them all. "Working lunch?"

"I have another class shortly," Will explains, wondering whether it's even worth his effort to dab at the stains on his shirt with the already-soiled tissue. His wrist is going to smell like terrible coffee for the rest of the day, even if he washes his hands in the bathroom.

"No rest for the wicked," Price says sagely, and nods his head down at the photographs. "You know, they were very well-fertilised, all of them, buried in a highly concentrated mixture of hardwoods, shredded newspaper, and pig poop. Perfect for growing mushrooms and other fungi."

Zeller, who, despite his words, had made a half-hearted attempt at unwrapping his burrito, makes a face and wraps the food back up again. "Cause of death wasn't the mushrooms though. What killed all of them was kidney failure."

“The tests came in?” Beverly asks with interest.

Price nods around a generous mouthful of beans and rice, mumbling something that sounds like *duck stores*.

“Dextrose,” Zeller translates for the uninitiated. “In all the catheters? Unsub probably used some kind of dialysis or peristaltic to pump fluids after the circulatory systems broke down.”

Will frowns. “Force-feeding them sugar water.”

Price swallows his mouthful and then says, much more intelligibly than before, “You know who loves sugar water? Mushrooms. They crave it. As much as a mushroom can crave anything.”

“Recovering alcoholics crave sugar,” adds Zeller. Waits a beat, and then only to Price: “Don't take that personally.”

“Oh, I'm not recovering,” says Price without rancour, and takes another large bite of his burrito.

Thus reassured, Zeller continues, “Feed sugar to fungus in your body, the fungus makes alcohol. It's friends helping friends really.”

Beverly joins Will in frowning, swallowing the last bite of her lunch and crumpling its wrapping in a ball in her hand. “Is someone preying on recovering alcoholics? Other than themselves?”

“Alcoholics aren't the only ones with compromised endocrine systems,” Will reminds them all, sifting quickly through his thoughts and tilting his head towards Zeller. There’s something there, dots almost connected into a larger picture - “They all died of kidney failure?” Zeller nods, and - *there.* “Death by diabetic ketoacidosis.”

“Did you know they were diabetics?” Beverly asks Zeller.

Zeller frowns. “We don't know they're diabetics.”

“They're all diabetics,” Will says, firm as fact is fact, and grabs his coffee again. “He induces a coma and puts them in the ground.”

“How is he inducing diabetic comas?” Beverly asks Will, barely suppressing her smile at Zeller’s obvious disgruntlement.

“He changes their medication. He's a doctor or a pharmacist or works somewhere in medical services.”

“He buries them, feeds them sugar to keep them alive long enough for the circulatory systems to soak it up...”

“So he can feed the mushrooms,” Price chimes in.

Diabetics to feed the mushrooms, and the growth of the mushrooms is what their killer wants.

The peevishness of Zeller's expression fades into grim realisation. "...We dug up his mushroom garden."

"He'll want to grow a new one," says Will, and takes another swig of his much cooler coffee whilst they digest that thought. (Time does *not* improve the drink's flavour.) More idly, he queries, "Considering I was never here, which one of you will be taking this to Jack?"

There's a significant pause as Will *hears* Beverly, Zeller and Price's brains shift gears - and the three leap in at once, Price still with a mouth full of food, all scrabbling to be the first to go *not it.*

Setting up in Abigail's hospital room gets easier every time Will does it, his visits settling into an almost comforting routine. It's a good thing too; Will had slept poorly the night before, nightmares waking him at two, three and half past four in the morning. The last one had had him sitting bolt upright in bed so fast the muscles in his back still ache from it that afternoon, yanking up the hem of his t-shirt to reassure himself that a cluster of mushrooms hadn't sprouted from his torso whilst he slept, gills fluttering on the stalks where they'd burrowed into his lungs. With his mind still insisting that his trembling fingers were coloured with clay and mould and that the air around him was full of fungal spores, Will had given up on sleep after that, letting the dogs out early for their morning romp around the house, their barks and a cup of steaming coffee greeting the weak dawn.

After Will had gotten dressed, of course. He can't quite stand to let his bare feet touch earth at the moment, pale toes against dark dirt too reminiscent of his dreams.

("Why does the unsub want mushrooms?" Will had wondered the day before in the Quantico labs, half to himself, half to the still-attentive Beverly. Price had moved on from his burrito to a vanilla pudding cup, whilst Zeller had decided to risk the coffee. "He didn't harvest from his crop."

Unhelpfully, Price had only hummed around the spoon in his mouth, but Beverly had considered the question - before she, too, could only shrug. "Maybe we found his garden before he had the opportunity?")

So, half-asleep after an early start and a morning class, Will unpacks his workbag on autopilot, pulling Abigail's table over to the cushioned seat he's taken by her bed. Pens, a stack of papers to grade, his laptop to input the grades as he goes along.

Abigail's room is a good place to work: the time between lunch and first visiting hours (that Will can take advantage of due to his association with the FBI) at the hospital is quiet up in

the less-intensive wards, with staff taking their lunch-breaks and non-comatose patients often napping off the effects of their own meals and the latest round of their medications. Abigail, still deep in her coma, is hardly noisy company, and Will's jangled nerves are soothed by being able to watch her breathe, listening to the regular beat of her heart monitor.

The scent of the lemon cleanser used to recently mop the floors is initially a little intrusive, eliminating the perfumes and natural scents of any visitors to the room, but the bright citrus smell is infinitely more homely than the sharper scent of antiseptic that clings to Abigail's skin - leftover traces of the disinfectant wet wipes used to prepare the girl for her various injections. A bouquet of closed blue-purple gentians holds pride of place on Abigail's bedside cabinet (the vase stands alone there, with no competition), though the infamously scentless flowers do nothing to assuage the sterility of the air around them, bright to look at but easy to forget.

Will gets about a quarter of the way through his marking before he needs to take a break - or else risk slamming his face off the table in front of him in the hopes it might blind him to his students' piss-poor profiling skills and basic spelling and grammar errors.

The outrageous claims lacking in all supporting evidence that some of Will's students try to pass off to him as profiles are par for the course, but is spellcheck not a thing any more? To be accepted to the FBI Academy, trainees need a recommendation from a superior in their previous area(s) of work and/or study, but Will has to wonder at the validity of those recommendations when the *last* submission he'd just read had spelled 'crime scene' correctly exactly *once* in several thousand words. Agents out in the field are supposed to be able to give a clear and concise summation of incidents in their reports, but, if Will lets *this* batch of trainees loose into the FBI without some sort of reprimand for the lazy editing of their work, whoever reads their reports one day is going to be reading about 'cream scenes' and 'chrome scents' instead of information useful for investigating cases of serial homicide, drug smuggling, and domestic terrorism.

Cream scene, honestly. Had the unsub been allergic to dairy?

Will walks around the room to stretch his legs, idly rotating his wrist to relieve some of the ache built up there from holding his pen. The view from the window is nothing startling - hospital buildings, mostly, with a few trees and shrubs lining the walkways between buildings with shades of green and autumnal oranges -, but it allows great swathes of clean, warm sunshine into the room, the blinds opened to admit as much cheeriness indoors as the weather will allow.

When he closes his eyes, the warmth of the sun on Will's face is something damn near therapeutic. The space behind his closed eyes is filled with nothing for a few moments but peace shaded balmy black and gold, a hot night full of fireflies on the edges of the bayou.

Which makes the intrusion of two women talking not-too-quietly in the hallway just outside the ward all the more abrupt.

"- she's daddy's little murderess."

"*Shh.*"

“Don’t *shh* me; I’m telling you, whether she helped kill those girls or not, she has *got* to have eaten them.” Will’s eyes snap open to a painful blare of sunlight, the tone of the woman speaking turning conspiratorially salacious. “Lounds has got it right - why do you think all the feds keep hovering ‘round? She’s a killer and a *cannibal.*”

They’re obviously talking about Abigail. Right outside the comatose girl’s ward where anyone can hear them - including Abigail, if what they say about people in comas still hearing things around them is true.

Disgusting. Will’s lips curls.

“If she were a killer,” the second woman reasons, “she’d be in cuffs.”

Her companion isn’t to be convinced. “What’s the point in cuffing a sleeper? No, they’ll want her awake for a confession.”

“If they need a confession, they can’t prove she did anything bad.”

“‘Course she did something *bad,* Lisa. She *ate people.*”

Will stalks towards the door, furious about the indiscreet gossiping.

“Not a crime to eat people if you don’t know you’re doing it," says Lisa, "or someone made you do it.”

“Bet you’ll say her daddy *made* her help him kill those other girls too.”

“I’m saying *nothing.* Girl’s in a damn coma, Evie. All we gotta do is make sure she gets well enough someone *else* can ask her these questions. Not our job to handle that.”

“No,” Will grinds out, taking some small vicious pleasure when the two women - nurses, by the colour of their scrubs - standing by the desk a few metres down from Abigail’s room jump at the sound of his voice and the sight of him standing in Abigail’s doorway. Caught red-handed. “It’s *not.*”

Both nurses have gone pale.

One opens her mouth - *Evie,* by the sound of her, Abigail’s accuser. The short, tight black braid of her hair is dyed an incongruous bronze at the tips, the colour gleaming like the self-righteous malevolence in her eyes. “We were just -”

“You were *‘just’* gossiping and spreading malicious rumours about a vulnerable patient under your care,” Will cuts in, holding back none of his scathing disgust. Fists clenched, his nails bite into his palms. “*Right outside her ward.*”

Evie’s cheeks flush a dull, defensive red. “All the blogs are saying it -”

“Does reading a few *blogs* exempt you from your duty of care?” Will snaps, and Evie turns even redder. “Or - hell - *common decency?!* How can you stand there and pass judgement on a young girl who isn’t even awake to defend herself? *Walk away,*” Will advises Evie harshly,

when it looks like the woman is about to say something else, “and get yourself assigned to another ward. If I see you here again, I’ll be speaking to the head nurse and putting in a formal complaint.”

Evie gives Will one last, blazingly indignant look, but takes Will’s advice and turns on her heel, stalking down the corridor away from Abigail’s room and Will’s castigation.

Will’s gaze slides to the other nurse still standing there. Pink-faced, but radiating more shame than her friend had done. Lisa.

“You spoke in Miss Hobbs’ defence.”

“Figured it’s none of my business what people have done before they end up in hospital,” Lisa murmurs, some of the stiffness of her shoulders relaxing when it becomes clear Will isn’t going to give her a tongue-lashing as well, “as long as it doesn’t impact how I’m supposed to look after them. You get all sorts.”

Will merely hums, not impressed at someone reaching the low bar for humanity, and makes to go back inside Abigail’s room.

“It really is everywhere online,” Lisa says, and Will pauses. Gives the nurse a questioning look. “*Tattlecrime* ran an article on it this morning. Claimed to have it sourced straight from the FBI.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you read,” Will says shortly - but goes back to Abigail’s bedside so he can pull up the web browser on his laptop, sitting down and rubbing thoughtlessly at an ache in his chest.

Tattlecrime. The name is very vaguely familiar to Will in a way that suggests he isn’t going to like what he’s about to see whatsoever - and is proved correct in very short order when a rather luridly designed true crime blog loads up on the screen before him, one clickbait article listed for viewing after another with ads to the side and in between.

There are two fairly recent articles about the mushroom-covered corpses in the woods, but the top article had been posted just that morning: *BIRDS OF A FEATHER?*

Below the headline is a photograph of Abigail awake and smiling, obviously taken from some kind of school yearbook. And beside the photograph is a complete, if badly-written, regurgitation of all of Jack Crawford’s suspicions about Abigail Hobbs’ involvement in her serial killer father’s crimes.

“Fuck,” says Will. And then, more vehemently, *“Fuck!”* Slamming his laptop shut.

If this kind of *horseshit* stays in circulation, the general public will crucify Abigail regardless of her innocence, transferring her from the fear of her father’s shadow to the fear of *everyone’s*.

Even worse, the fear-mongering in the article has clearly got *some* kind of basis, taken from *some* kind of source in the FBI. It’s too close to Jack’s queries, Jack’s wording of those

queries, for comfort.

Will's phone rings. It's Beverly, and, for a minute, Will thinks she's calling about the article, about a leak in the FBI, but -

"Will, hi." Beverly sounds harried, but still too friendly for it to be about the article. Noise in the background from her end: people's voices barking orders, moving feet. "Do you do phone consults? Please say you do phone consults."

Will can't say they're something he's really tried before. He sits back in his seat, letting the cushioned back of the chair support his neck. "Depends who's asking."

"Me. Me, I'm asking. Well, honestly, Jack is asking, but not for consults. He asked me and the Tweedles questions, and this is me, asking you."

"...You're in the field," Will realises, closing his eyes again and re-evaluating the background noises from Beverly's end of the call, laying it over the sound of the heart monitor in the room with him.

She's indoors somewhere. Not Quantico. With armed agents. Apprehending a suspect?

"Out picking mushrooms," Beverly confirms, and tucks the phone in a little more closely to her face. Her voice, when she speaks next, is louder, and Will hears her breath in the receiver. "And their gardener. He's a pharmacist, like you said. Eldon Stammets. We found a string of missing diabetic persons: all customers of the same pharmacy chain, all who disappeared after filling in an insulin prescription. The last two from our location, last one yesterday, the same place where this guy works. Worked, maybe. We hit it, but he's gone already. Left early, claiming he was sick."

"Gone home?"

"People we sent to his location say no. And no car in the drive." Explaining why Beverly - and no doubt the other agents with her - sounds so harried. "Got any idea where he'll have gone?"

The answer is obvious. "He'll have gone off to plant his latest victim."

"In his mushroom garden?"

Will nods - and then remembers Beverly can't see him. "Not the one we've hit; that's ruined for him now. Another garden, somewhere new." And Will doesn't know where, doesn't know this killer well enough yet to even attempt a proper guess aside from somewhere woody and secluded. *Why mushrooms?* "I don't know where, Bev; I'm sorry. Best I can suggest is you get teams searching the woods where we found his last garden, get the dogs going after his scent. Maybe he'll have dug down somewhere nearby. Run the plates on his new vehicle - he must have bought one recently to replace his wagon, so he can transport his victims."

Beverly sighs, but accepts it. "Thanks, Will. I'll tell Jack. Think he knows we're onto him?"

Of course the suspect - *Stammets* - knows the FBI is onto him.

“If he didn’t before, he certainly will now the feds have gone after his workplace and his house.” Since he can’t help her any further from where he is, Will changes the subject. “Not to make your day any worse, but has Jack read *Tattlecrime* at all recently?”

“*Tattlecrime*? That crappy true crime blog?”

“Tell him to bring up the latest article,” Will says - and then recalls the recent posts on the site about Beverly’s case as well. If the blog had insider information about Abigail, maybe there’s something there that shouldn’t *be* there about their gardener as well. “Articles.”

“Doesn’t sound good,” says Beverly, and Will *mm*s back at her. He doesn’t envy her if she’s there when Jack actually pulls up the blog. “I’m really beginning to hate when you delegate, do you know that?”

It’s a bitter thing, but Beverly’s comment makes Will laugh for the first time that day.

“Consider it my consulting fee.”

The hospital is comparatively quiet again when Will hangs up. There’s a few more people in the corridors now, staff and patients, but Abigail still continues to sleep the deep sleep of the comatose beside Will.

He watches her silently for a few moments, pacing his breathing to the slow rise and fall of her chest.

Will has no idea what he’s going to say to Abigail when she eventually wakes up, but he’ll have to say *something.* Needs to see her get better from this, no longer her father’s victim, not further victimised by the ignorant masses led by the likes of *Tattlecrime*.

Until then, however, Will has some terrible essays to grade. It’ll be visiting hours at the hospital soon, and he wants to leave before someone else might get it into their heads to drop in on Abigail. He can return again in the evening, when the hospital lies half under a blanket of sleep.

Cream scenes disappear under the strike of his red pen.

Chapter End Notes

Canard: (duck) 1, a duck. 2, an unfounded or baseless, often derogatory, rumor or anecdote. 3, a slang word for *newspaper*. 4, a piece of sugar slightly soused with coffee or cognac (or another strong alcohol), and more.

More *Amuse-Bouche* this chapter.

Hannibal’s comment about Will’s monologue vs. Tedeschi’s *Forensic Science* comes from an extract in *Red Dragon* (where it’s actually Brian Zeller that first mentions Will’s

work, rather than Beverly in the show):
"You're reading Tedeschi."
"Yes," Zeller said over his shoulder. "We don't do any forensic medicine here, as you know, but Tedeschi has a lot of useful things in there. Graham. Will Graham. You wrote the standard monograph on determining time of death by insect activity, didn't you. Or do I have the right Graham?"
"I did it." A pause. "You're right, Mant and Nuorteva in the Tedeschi are better on insects."
Zeller was surprised to hear his thought spoken. "Well, it does have more pictures and a table of invasion waves. No offense."
"Of course not. They're better. I told them so."

'Mstr' is the abbreviation for the prefixed title/form of address *Master.*

I took a break from editing and rewatched *Amuse-Bouche* to double-check I was hitting all the notes I wanted for this chapter, and, for the first time, actually noticed Will's carrying around some kind of hot beverage (assumedly coffee) in the scene in the lab where he figures out the victims are all diabetics. Just parks that cup of his on one of the slabs beside a dead, fungus-covered body whilst unnamed specialists examine the corpse. *Real hygienic*. Is there not a no food/drink in the lab rule? Why is there not a no food/drink in the lab rule? At least when there are corpses out in the open. *Will.*

In standard (western) floriography, closed gentians mean *sweet dreams*.

I spent way too long researching this, but there are no laws in the USA specifically outlawing cannibalism except in Idaho. A bit more on cannibalism in American law here.

rissole

Chapter Summary

Everyone seeks connection, one way or another. Will dreams and dreams again.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait, and a very happy Easter to you all. It's hard to believe that when I first started writing this chapter, my biggest distraction was *Death Stranding*.
Please note the updated fic tags; they're very relevant to this chapter. If you don't want to see body horror featuring fungi in your dream-threesomes, depart the third scene at *fungi*. It's safe to return at *mankind*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The part that Will finds strangest later is that he never questions the presence of the black stag in the corridor. The stag simply *is,* drifting placidly down the hospital hallway like a dark cloud across the moon, its antlers heavy atop its head and hooves clicking like the quiet rhythmic *tick* of a clock. *Click, click, click.*

Fish-hook buried in his heart, Will is drawn from his seat and follows.

Aside from the stag and Will, the corridor is empty. There are no nurses at their station, no doctors, patients or porters wandering the halls. Most of the doorways of the hall yawn wide, dark and empty with the wards beyond them silent, but even the ones showing bald light yield no signs of life. Blinds are drawn closed over all the windows, slats bordered by thin slivers of forbidding night, and the overhead lights hum on the very edge of audible, raising the hairs on the back of Will's neck.

The stag continues unhindered. The animal seems not to care that Will has been brought so close to it in the confines of the hospital's halls - nor that Will has now stopped, feet planted to the floor and watching as the stag steps placidly away from him. Its dark pelt is glossy even under the cheap and unforgiving electric lights above, the hide made up of feathers, slick with unknown oils, rather than fur.

Still, that does not seem strange.

The stag turns a corner, out of Will's sight, and the lights at the end of the corridor go out. Then the ones next to them, and the ones next to *them* follow suit - one by one, the lights

click off, and the deep and silent darkness rushes towards Will as he stands there waiting for the wave, his eyes drifting shut just as night swallows him whole.

In the darkness, he hears Alana Bloom.

“He and the grandmother discussed better times.”

At the bottom of the thick black ocean, Will stirs. He struggles upwards towards consciousness with the gradual awareness of his own slow, deep breaths, slowly prising his eyes open through lashes still sticky with the saltwater of his dreams.

What greets him upon surfacing is the sight of Abigail’s hospital bed, Alana sitting barefoot on the mattress beside the comatose girl and reading aloud from a book in her lap. The evening sun is still shining through the windows and the room smells comfortingly like violets - or at least, the little space around Will does. The sweet perfume rises up faintly from the hospital blanket tugged up over Will’s shoulders where he is half-lying on the private ward’s couch, grey material tucked gently under his chin.

Will hadn’t fallen asleep with a blanket over him. Not that he had meant to fall asleep. Sure, he’d rolled up his jacket to pillow his head on the couch’s arm, but he’d just meant to rest his eyes for a few minutes, take a break from watching out for the gossiping Evie of that afternoon. But he’d closed his eyes...

Still sleepy, Will fists the thin material of the blanket and brings it to his face, letting the drowsy drag-sensation of the weave against his nose wake him up a little more, enjoying the scent of Alana’s perfume still clinging to the fabric. He breathes, deep and slow, and listens to her voice.

“The old lady said that, in her opinion, Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now. She said-”

“What are you reading?”

Alana startles, and jerks to look back over her shoulder at Will.

Will hadn’t meant for his question to come out so abruptly, but his sleep-rough throat had cracked out the words from the bottom of the chasm still threatening to tug him back under, his mind and tongue and limbs all still warm and heavy with dreams.

Recovering quickly from her surprise and seeing Will awake, Alana smiles: the break of a slow and golden sunrise after an early summer’s night.

Will lets it warm him; Abigail hardly counts as real company at the moment, so Alana has as good as placed herself alone with Will again. It’s beginning to become something of a - hope-inducing - habit for her.

“Flannery O'Connor. When I was Abigail's age I was obsessed. I even tried to raise peacocks because she raised peacocks, but…” Alana’s expression turns rueful, “they are *really* stupid birds.”

Will's gaze slides past her to the third in the room. "You could be reading to a killer."

"Innocent until guilty… and all that."

"Not according to Ms. Freddie Lounds of *Tattlecrime*.com."

Alana sighs. "The *Birds of a Feather* article."

"Yes," Will says, and props himself up on the couch so he can stretch his arms above him, careful not to let his blanket slip to the floor, "*that*."

"I've started arrangements for Abigail's transfer to Port Haven," Alana says, and swings her legs off the bed one after the other so she can turn and look at Will more directly. "I wanted to wait until she had woken up, but with that article drawing such attention to her…"

Will avoids her eyes, his own gaze still settled on Abigail's wan features surrounded by tubes and tape. "The bereaved and the scandalised are looking for someone to blame."

"The Minnesota Shrike is dead."

"And Abigail Hobbs doesn't deserve to be punished for her father's crimes." No matter what the Freddie Loundses of the world have to say about it, whether they gossip about it on online blogs or in hospital hallways. Will's lip curls into a sneer at the memory. "She's been assigned to your psychiatric care when she wakes?" Alana nods. "Good."

Alana, unlike many other psychiatrists that Will has become acquainted with over the years, *always* puts her patients first.

Alana allows herself a smile, and the mirthful swell of it tugs Will away from the darker corners of his thoughts. "I'll take the compliment of your rare endorsement."

"I endorse plenty," Will protests.

"In quantity rather than in variety," Alana teases him, "as long as it comes in a form with four legs, a wet nose, and a tendency to go *woof*."

"The local wildlife would like us a great deal more if all they did *was* go *woof*." Will sighs, and stretches again, feeling the bones *click* back into place in his spine. "Remind me to invite you over sometime so you can hear Buster's ongoing feud with the squirrels. Little dog. *Lots* of noise."

Alana laughs. "The best things come in small bundles," she reminds Will.

"Yeah, tell that to the squirrels."

Alana laughs again, and Will takes a slow breath in, his own smile pulling at his mouth as his head lolls back against the back of the couch behind him.

"...Abigail is a success for you," Alana notes.

From little dogs to little women. Will lets the slow breath out again. “She doesn't look like a success.”

“Don't feel sorry for yourself because you saved this girl's life.”

“I don't,” Will says, soft and wondering at realising the truth of his words even as he speaks them. He lifts his head again. “I don't feel sorry for myself *at all*. I feel, uh… I feel, um. Good.”

Alana looks pleased by the admission, so Will cannot help but add self-deprecatingly: “Maybe it was the nap.”

“You were fast asleep when I arrived,” Alana says gently. “You looked tired, so I-” She gestures at Will vaguely, glancing away with her cheeks faintly pink.

So I didn’t want to wake you.

So I brought you a blanket, and tucked you in.

Will’s fingers are still twisted in the blanket - his shirt and hands will carry the trace scent of Alana’s perfume for the rest of the evening. Violets and care.

“Thank you,” says Will, and means it. He smiles crookedly, letting his shoulders rise and fall in a flustered shrug. “I was- actually, I was just enjoying listening to you read.”

“Really?” Will nods, and Alana’s fingers flex in their grip on her book. “I could…” She looks down at the open pages on her lap. “I won’t be offended if you fall asleep again.”

“Promise?” Will asks her wryly, for his limbs are still warm and sleep-heavy, and the quiet comforting cadence of Alana’s reading might work on him as a lullaby.

Alana merely brings one of her legs up onto the bed with the rest of her again, bending it at the knee and tucking its ankle beneath her opposing thigh, before picking up where she had left off in her story, reading to the room. “The old lady said that, in her opinion, Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now. She said the way Europe acted you would think we were made of money and Red Sam said it was no use talking about it, she was exactly right.”

Certain sights have grown familiar to Hannibal when visiting the mysterious Miss Abigail Hobbs in her hospital room. Nurses taking her vitals and moving the comatose girl on occasion to prevent muscle wastage and bed sores. Cleaners emptying the room’s bin and mopping the floor. A few doctors. A harried nameless FBI agent, checking in on behalf of Jack Crawford. Alana Bloom, visiting between hours at work and home. Most often, Will

Graham, drinking terrible coffee from the hospital food court as he alternates marking his students' work with forlornly watching Abigail breathe.

Before Will had decided to start avoiding both general visiting hours and Hannibal.

Domesticity is something new. A heartwarming snapshot from a TV advert, a movie's reflective post-denouement scene.

Visiting Abigail alone, Alana tends towards gentle, concerned professionalism. Will, in comparison, is always entirely emotionally compromised and poor at hiding it, restless with his thoughts and too uncomfortable to settle in the ward though he makes vain attempt after vain attempt to do so anyway. Belongings determinedly spread out around his fidgeting limbs as a cry of persistence, asserting his right to be there even as he privately questions that right himself.

Together, the two of them have contrived to paint a different picture in the evening light: Alana, reading aloud with her legs tucked up beneath herself on the hospital bed, and Will, not comatose but still joining Abigail in her dreams, slipped sideways on the hospital room's cream two-seater with a blanket sliding off his shoulders, his tousled head pillowed on the faded green of his folded-up jacket.

Hannibal stands at the door unnoticed, his bag over his shoulder and his arms full of flowers - a new bouquet, to replace Abigail's wilting gentians. Sunflowers, for Hannibal's pride in the girl's stubborn cling to life. Burgundy and pink roses, both to acknowledge Abigail's unconscious beauty and to show that the world is not lacking in affection, even for the daughter of a killer. Germini, the smaller sisters of gerbera daisies, for Abigail's youth, a gentle hearkening to innocence lost. All wrapped in the berries and deep dark foliage of fall, the rich golden season of death and the reaper that is upon them.

"'Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead,' The Misfit continued," the character's accent given strange voice in Alana's serious tones, "'and He shouldn't have done it. He shown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can - by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.'"

A compelling argument for the faithful.

"I see great minds think alike," Hannibal says, fixing his lips into a smile as Alana lifts her head to look at him.

She looks a little embarrassed to have been caught in such a casual moment, gaze flickering down to her lap again for a moment to check the rucked-up hemline of her dress, but she remains relaxed overall, the general blanket of tranquillity draped across the ward undisturbed by Hannibal's entrance. Even the evening sunlight is determined to acknowledge him as little as possible; the windows face roughly westward, and the incoming light leaves Hannibal's shadow behind him as he steps further into the room.

"Hannibal. You saw the article."

“It’s causing quite a stir,” Hannibal says mildly, leaving his hands pointedly full of rustling flowers as he lets the strap of his bag awkwardly slip off his shoulder and catch in the crook of his arm. “It would appear the great FBI has sprung a leak.”

Alana’s welcoming smile tightens. “I’ve already had words with Jack.” She sets aside her book and comes to help Hannibal with his load - revealing her lack of shoes, her heels clearly discarded so their sound might not disturb the resting. Ever considerate. “Let me help you with that. Should I get a vase?”

“One of the nurses should be along with one presently,” Hannibal says, depositing the bouquet in Alana’s open arms regardless. The arrangement seems larger in her grasp than it was in his own, autumn colours spilling from her arms and occupying Alana almost in entirety as she does her best not to crush leaves, berries or blooms. “I see you have not lost your love for the works of Flannery O’Connor.”

Alana laughs a little - pleased, though certainly embarrassed now. “You remember that.”

“But of course; you loaned me your books.” Hannibal makes a show of hesitance, still gripping his bag. “Though, Alana, I must query: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find?* Perhaps another of O’Connor’s might be more suitable in this environment.” He tilts his head towards the unconscious Abigail, catching Alana’s gaze as it lights with realisation. “Rather than the tale of a fractured family, and the serial killer who shoots them all.”

Hannibal’s own choice of reading material for that evening is Fleming’s English translation of *Candide* - arguably a piece of work as depressing to a wounded individual as Alana’s, but more subtle about it.

Alana is disturbed before she can reply by the arrival of the promised vase and Hannibal leaves her to arrange and rearrange the room’s flowers, gently lowering his bag to the ground beside the taken two-seater and following it down into a crouch to regard the couch’s occupant.

Will Graham seems remarkably comfortable sleeping in the presence of Alana Bloom. It is a strange thing to see a creature of wild restlessness so calmed; Hannibal is already accustomed to Will’s constant movement, pacing and touching and darting his eyes out of sight. Now, Will is all soft lines in his slumber, his resting shape smoothed out like the petals of the rose galaxy, frenetic stars pulled gently into place by the gravity of a nearby friend.

Or the *smell* of one: the blanket Will has tucked up close to his face is rather tellingly scented with Alana’s perfume. More than would normally rub off someone’s fingertips or wrist from a fleeting touch.

Hannibal’s lips peel back from his teeth in an infinitesimal snarl.

Alana had only started wearing that particular perfume during her residency at Hannibal’s recommendation, after a trying few months going through various cheap, temporary blends in the hope of finding a scent that worked well with her beta body chemistry.

Fragrance departments and boutiques are nearly always divided primarily by dynamic, with the stronger scents aimed at the beta demographic set apart from the milder products aimed at alphas and omegas.

Aside from the pheromone-heavy scents meant to emulate heat or rut, alphas and omegas are encouraged to only buy lightly scented perfumes and cosmetics to add a little depth to their natural scents. These can be alternated and/or combined as an individual pleases to add variety to their life, or simply to bring a particular note in their scent to the forefront.

Conversely, betas are often subtly shamed into their scented purchases. Most betas naturally have both weaker olfactory senses and weaker scents in general - when it is not assumed that they have no scent at all. Those without distinguishing scents are frequently overlooked and patronised by society, much like the as-yet unpresented children those with weak scents are likened to.

Social advancement in any form is tied to *presence,* and, to have presence, one must have their own defining scent to both announce their company and to leave some mark of their passing behind them. Social sillage. Marketing utilises this idea to drive sales, suggesting that the solution to betas' low self-esteem can be found in fragrant perfumes, colognes, aftershaves, toiletries and other enhancers.

Alana naturally has a very, very mild scent, which Hannibal thinks may be best likened to catching a small stray breeze from an open window somewhere, admitting a light breath of rain falling in the new green of spring. It is a scent both fresh and pleasing, much like the woman who exudes it - but for those with a sense of smell less sensitive than Hannibal's, it is a scent that is sometimes incredibly difficult to detect.

In the earlier days of her residency, Alana had been frustrated by the patronising attitudes she had received from many for her lack of an 'assertive' or 'adult' scent. Though, indeed, it had been society's poor manners at fault for Alana's ill-treatment rather than any personal failing of her own, it must be admitted that one's perfume or cologne is a great deal easier to change than the whole of American society - *especially* when one is simultaneously trying to both help one's patients and advance in a career as gruelling as medicine.

After a particularly offensive chypre-based spray Alana had tried wearing had stung Hannibal's nose for three days straight, Hannibal had gently suggested his beta protégée try a perfume primarily violet-based instead. Something sweet and light to compliment her natural scent and match her temperament, but not so associated with the elderly or as dustily bland as lavender or lily-of-the-valley.

Now, those selfsame violets scent *Will,* sweet springtime encroaching on the omega's natural winter night. Each slow draw of the profiler's breath drags Alana's perfume across his palate and into his lungs, her scent following Will down into his unfathomable dreams.

The thought of another treading such hallowed grounds before Hannibal, without him, is not something to be borne, so Hannibal reaches out after pulling back the cuffs on one arm, dragging his wrist quick and deliberate along both the bent collar of Will's rumpled salmon-coloured shirt and the blanket beneath Will's nose.

To anyone watching, it seems as though Hannibal has only caringly readjusted the blanket of a sleeping friend. But no-one *is* watching - Will is deeply asleep and Alana is still busy arranging flowers -, allowing Hannibal to rise to his full height again with proprietary satisfaction, Will Graham now as thoroughly marked with the scent of Hannibal's spicy cologne as plausible deniability for such possessiveness will allow.

"I didn't think of the subject matter at all," Alana says, her thoughts still occupied by the conversation Hannibal has already relegated to a position of secondary interest, tugging at the dark green of the leaves in the vase in front of her to frame the flowers better.

Hannibal solicitously clears space for her to place the vase on Abigail's bedside cabinet by removing the now-faded gentians there, taking the older - but still stubbornly surviving - purple flowers to the lonely windowsill. "We have all made similar missteps at one time or another, I believe. In an attempt at likewise coaxing her into levity, I once made heavy reference to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with a younger patient who had lost some members of her family in a house fire a few years before - only to later learn that amongst those that had perished in the blaze had been the family's beloved pet rabbit."

"Oh no - white?" Hannibal nods, and Alana winces sympathetically. "Off with your head."

"You have the comfort at least that your audience is asleep, and likely will not remember your *faux pas*."

"Will woke up earlier." Alana smiles around Will's name, a mention that might be offhand had it not evidently lightened the stress gathering on her shoulders. Hannibal really must make further discreet inquiries about the relationship between his former protégée and the omega that Jack Crawford is so desperately trying to claim as a bloodhound for the BAU. "He's not happy about the article either."

"Nor should anyone with an interest in Abigail's wellbeing."

Alana nods in agreement, mostly to herself, and finishes fiddling with the flowers. When she steps back from the bedside cabinet on her bare feet, Hannibal shifts as well to avoid looming over her.

"Did- have you and Will talked?"

"...You are very carefully not asking if Will made an appointment with me," Hannibal discerns, keeping his countenance smooth as Alana glances at him. There is an anxious twitch in her fingers now, reaching out to close the book that she had discarded earlier on Abigail's bed.

"You couldn't - or shouldn't - be answering that, not without his permission. But I can ask if the two of you have talked. Unofficially."

Such a careful delineation. Hannibal lifts a brow, mouth quirking. "If Will and I have talked unofficially, or are you asking me unofficially if Will and I have talked?"

"...You're teasing," Alana realises, the mask of professionalism on her face cracking with exasperated fondness.

"I am," Hannibal confirms, allowing his mouth to stretch more widely and put Alana at ease. "Will and I have talked, but he is not currently a patient of mine. I am not comfortable saying much more than that without his consent, but we will likely be talking again."

Beautifully steered, Alana relaxes again. "I'm glad. I wasn't sure how the two of you would get along since you're both such very different people. Perhaps if I'd introduced the two of you a little sooner… but Will's not really one to suffer unnecessary introductions."

No, Will has already - correctly - weighed the type of people who most frequently seek introductions with him and found them wanting, magnificent in his open disdain. Even those amongst the tide of humanity that actively improve the world around them - or those whose dull lives render them too much effort to dispose of - are hampered by their own lack of understanding of Will's gifts, too quick to turn to fear or pity rather than rightful awe. And of those left, well...

"Many introductions must become unnecessary when one is capable of reading of another's intentions at a glance," Hannibal surmises. "Adding the insult of lies and the banalities of small-talk, and our Will's approach to socialisation seems almost understandable."

Were cultivating such a wide social circle and a reputation for sociability not important for maintaining Hannibal's position as a doyen of Baltimore society and all its attached bonuses, Hannibal would be sorely tempted to emulate him.

Alana, who has borne witness on more than a few occasions to some of Baltimore's harpy mothers trying to entice Hannibal into bonding and/or matrimony with one of their numerous spoilt offspring, senses the more socially palatable corners of that truth and is already beginning to grin. "Should I pass that message along to your friends at the opera?"

"Note, I said '*almost,*'" Hannibal informs Alana archly, and smiles as she laughs, accepting her gentle joke at his expense. "Will is very lucky to have found such a stalwart friend in you, Alana."

"And I in him," says Alana, soft, though there is not a shred of doubt in her voice as she stands a little taller. If she were alpha or omega Hannibal would say Alana is all but purring at the compliment to both herself and her friend - before abruptly realising that someone in the room *is* purring.

Will. Will is purring. In his sleep. A quiet, even reverberation steady with the languorous rise and fall of his chest.

How fascinating. And, perhaps, how telling, if Will is prone to purring at a mere mouthful of good food, in the presence of friends, and when granted something that might nearly be called restful sleep. These things are not - *should* not - be luxuries, and yet Will Graham is purring when shown even an *ounce* of affection or care.

And Alana, who had caught Will's purr just a beat behind Hannibal, is blushing very noticeably pink.

She and Will are not very *intimate* friends then, it seems.

Alana coughs, looking away from where her gaze had flickered to Will on the couch and speaking a shade more loudly than before. "I'm arranging for Abigail's transfer to Port Haven. With that article circulating, it seems prudent to move her as soon as possible."

"Yes, that seems like the best decision to both keep her safe and maintain her privacy," Hannibal says, doing nothing whatsoever to alter the level of his own voice but otherwise content to allow Alana to use her work to ignore the profiler-shaped elephant in the room. "She may not, however, thank you for waking in a psychiatric facility."

Grimacing, Alana admits, "Few would, I think. But the important part is that she *does* wake up."

Hannibal concedes the point with a gracious dip of his head. Should an awakened Abigail object to her lodgings, it will be a good issue to push her away from Alana's sphere of influence and into Hannibal's orbit instead - should Hannibal choose to take advantage of it.

Will is still purring, a low and lovely sound that lodges itself in the guts. He must be having sweet dreams; the air inside the hospital room smells more strongly of the cardamom smoke-spice of his omega scent than before - and an answering, feminine beta musk from the woman in front of Hannibal. *Ah.*

Alana's pink has begun to stain her throat. "...I should really be on my way."

"Of course," Hannibal says graciously, allowing her the hasty retreat in her effort to keep her dignity. He isn't going to stop her - torn 'twixt heart and head and hormones, Alana hesitates enough herself, picking up her shoes and other belongings before pausing, half-turned towards the sofa and the man upon it.

The shapes of unspoken words hover in the room like drowsy city birds waking in the predawn, smoke-smudged suggestions of flight still tucked onto ledges and hidden in the guttering.

"I can pass on your farewell," Hannibal offers, tracking with sharp interest the weight of all the things unsaid.

His proposal is apparently the last push Alana requires, for the woman lets everything go then with one final sigh, gaze rent away from Will to the door. "Thank you, Hannibal. Please do; it feels so rude not to say goodbye. Have a good night?"

"And you." Hannibal's *evening* has already improved in leaps and bounds since he arrived at the hospital, and, if his night continues in the same manner, he will sleep later quite content indeed.

Usually, the departure of such a quick, bright and beautiful companion as Alana Bloom in a location as dull as a comatose patient's hospital ward would dim affairs, but the fleeing woman has left glittering jewels behind her: the knowledge of her attraction to Will Graham and how it flusters her, scattered suggestions on the kind of relationship Alana and Will have and how it may be manipulated, and the still-sleeping, gently purring, temporarily unconscious form of Will Graham himself.

So at-ease in whatever dreams Alana's reading and the mingled scents of Alana and Hannibal on the blanket he is draped in have taken him to, the sweet scent of Will's contentedness is thicker in the room than the cleaning supplies used on the floor or the fresh flowers on the bedside cabinet. And he is sweetly, beautifully oblivious to the brush of Hannibal's knuckles against his cheek, soft, sleep-warm skin dimpling under the gentle touch like the sweetest tender meat. Hannibal's teeth ache at the sight, itching for the flush of blood blooming like flowers high in Will's cheeks. The Firebird has gone to nest and left Sleeping Beauty behind, the prince tired from his gruelling adagio with a parade of suitors all vying for his insight.

In the ballet, Désiré wakes Aurora with a kiss. Should Will wake right now, Will's desire will most likely be making Hannibal suffer the sharp edges of Will's omega fangs - and, undoubtedly, the even sharper thrust of Will's temper. Since that would undo much of the good progress that Hannibal has achieved so far in eking out the very frailest strands of Will's trust, Hannibal removes his hand from Will's face - though not before tucking back one dark, errant curl of Will's hair that would impede Hannibal's view of the dreaming man's fluttering eyelids from the seat he plans to take at Abigail's bedside.

Leaving the faintest trace of the scent of his cologne in Will's hair, possessive, shivering silver over sweet spice, the claim nestled close against the beat of Will's pulse behind one ear.

Some things are worth the risk of a little suffering, after all.

They are in the woods around Wolf Trap, and the afternoon is warm. The fallen leaves crinkle under their bare knees as they move together, a constant crackling in orange and yellow that makes Alana laugh into Will's mouth when he kisses her, laughing himself at the ridiculousness of it all. They're both naked and wanting, but every time they shift their weights something under them goes *crack* or *crunch* all dry-soft and susurrous, their amorousness breaking into mirth.

"Like making love in a paper bag," Alana whispers, nosing at Will's jaw with a silly grin and shivering at the slide of Will's palms down the slope of her back. "I feel like a sandwich."

"These the buns?" Will asks with a wickedly cheerful grope of her backside, tugging Alana forward until the velvet of her nipples rubs his chest, his cock smearing wetness against her belly. Between them there is heat, and the flutter of eyelashes as their throats catch on moans,

the world coloured with perfect light the way it goes in Will's vision when his eyes flood gold.

"You're the *ham,*" Alana gasps to him when Will's hands slide lower, following the curve of her ass and dipping teasingly between her thighs from behind. She's wet there, slick as Will himself is, pushing back against the touch of his fingers.

Will laughs again at Alana's words, pressing kisses to her throat. "Honey-roasted?"

"Salty."

"The filling, should you extend that metaphor," murmurs a familiar voice behind Will with all the dark silk of lingering summer nights, the naked Hannibal Lecter sliding gracefully to his knees there with a grip on Will's waist and hips to steady him down.

Leaves whisper as they are crushed under the weight of three pairs of calves, and Will sways, shivering at the brush of Lecter's lips on his shoulder, instinctively leaning into the radiant warmth behind him and offering the beta male his throat with a whine. His eyes slide shut at the answering scrape of teeth to the tendons there, the nails that dig starbursts of white into one hip as Lecter's other hand burns like a furnace between Will's abdomen and Alana's.

Long, talented fingers grasp Will's cock, twisting at the head to smear the wet slick there and then dragging down firmly to the base. Gripping Will firmly as they guide him up between Alana's legs, controlling utterly the dizzying slowness of Will sliding inside of her heat. Will's fingers tighten in a death-grip around Alana's upper arms at the same pace, his breath shuddering out of him like a drowned man's last slip beneath the waves.

"Now filling." Only weight and voice, Lecter is all the hot darkness on the inside of Will's eyelids sliced through with the bright snap of teeth.

Will is shockingly aware of the man at his back. His shoulders go tight as his senses scream - *carnivore, predator, danger* -, but Lecter's hands on him only bring forth another unrepentant gush of Will's slick, Will's eyes fluttering open again, half-dazed, when he bottoms out inside of Alana.

Lecter's fingers still remain, stroking between Will and Alana and shivering the breath out of both of them, and Alana is beautiful trembling finely because of it, kneading almost catlike at Will's chest as she leans in for another kiss. She is mindspinningly tight inside, smooth wet walls rippling, dripping, around Will's cock, and Will is helpless at the sensation, at the lick of Alana's tongue parting his lips, slipping inside until she coaxes his response.

Lecter withdraws just enough that Will manages to gasp a half-forgotten breath, though his touch on Will's waist prevents Will from moving forward in anything but shallow, aborted little thrusts. He seems amused as he watches Will try to fuck Alana more deeply regardless, waiting a few moments before he breaks Will and Alana's liplock with a proprietary hand under Will's chin, turning Will's head to kiss him thoroughly as well with devouring teeth and tongue.

When they break apart again, panting, all Will can see is Lecter's soft plush mouth wet with their shared saliva, and dark, dark eyes that are all black pupil.

"Yes?" Lecter asks him, his thumb pressing into the corner of Will's mouth until Will's lips part for him again. Hooking Will like a fish and then pressing inside to test the sharpness of omega fangs against his pad.

"Yes," Will replies dazedly, teeth touched to flesh with the word - and Lecter must have cut himself in his exploration, for agreement tastes like sweet copper pennies on Will's tongue.

The flare of approval in Lecter's gaze makes Will purr, Alana humming in answer as she dips her head over his larynx, mouth pressed wet and open to the source of the sound. Will is still achingly hard inside of her, his thighs warm both back and front with Alana's slick and his own.

Lecter moves his hands to Will's hair, smearing bloody saliva over Will's cheek before fingers weave themselves tight through Will's curls to keep him still. His knees shove Will's legs further apart in the dirt from behind, forcing Will to accommodate for the wider breadth of Lecter's hips. Lecter's teeth take Will's nape without biting down, like some great cat holding its cub by the scruff, and, just so, slides inside of him, his thick cock parting Will's pliant rim with ease.

Will groans when Lecter snaps his hips forwards, filling Will and burying himself to the hilt. The movement drives Will further forward into Alana as well, who gasps and clutches at Lecter over Will's shoulders, one linked chain of singing nerves, action and reaction. Ha-Lecter is Alana's brace to her slow, urgent press against Will, and Alana Lecter's as he slowly withdraws almost entirely from Will's body - before just as slowly, inexorably, pushing forwards again until his hips lie flush with the curve of Will's ass.

"*Please*," Will moans, means *please, yes, faster,* but Lecter only begins the torturous cycle all over again.

Alana is the hot wet heaven around Will that he cannot push further into or pull further away from, his hips held firmly in place as Lecter thrusts almost languorously in and out of him again, each push smoother than the last and just that little bit closer to driving the wits out of Will's head. A ticking metronome, ticking over.

"Doctor- *Hannibal,"* Will reaches back blindly with one hand, nails scrabbling for Hannibal's thigh to try and get a grip on the other man, urge him on faster. He fails, and gets his hand playfully knocked away, the warm rumble of Hannibal's laughter stirring his hair, turning liquid in Will's belly. "Hannibal, *please.*"

Hannibal is still laughing as he kisses Will again and Will snarls at him for it, fangs sharp against Hannibal's lip until Will can draw the doctor's tongue between his lips and suck with all the voraciousness Hannibal *isn't* using to fuck him. Drool tinged pink with blood drips down their chins, catching in Will's stubble.

Hannibal and Alana continue to hold Will, use him, as they please, fucking him with their frustratingly, teasingly, languid thrusts. Will, trapped between the two betas, is unable to get

the leverage to thrust of his own accord, his pleasure controlled utterly by their pace. He is the conduit between them by which they enjoy each other: the fuck, fucking, fucked. And they- they are against him and around him, lips dragging against lips as they meet on Will's shoulder, Alana's fingers caressing Hannibal's biceps, Hannibal's fingers snagging in Alana's long dark hair. Driven half to delight, half despair, Will moans, twists and writhes, between them and snares whichever hot mouth will kiss him, his nails dragging red lines over both betas' bodies alike.

Eventually, Hannibal seems to tire of the torture of the desperate omega in his arms, communicating something to Alana with his eyes over Will's head. "Alana, if you wouldn't mind?"

Alana might not mind as she obliges by moving back and away from Will, letting him slip out from inside of her, but *Will* certainly does. Will almost sobs, his cock still wet with her slick and cooling rapidly, bereft of her warmth. When Hannibal pulls out of Will as well, leaving only a deep, hollow ache behind him, Will doesn't know which of them to reach for, a hand spread entreatingly in each direction.

Alana kisses the centre of a palm as an apology for him to wrap his fingers around as Hannibal rearranges them all, Alana on her back in the soft bed of warm dry dirt, twigs and leaves, with Will bent over her on his elbows and knees. Her feet are planted in the earth so the cradle of her pelvis is lifted to Will's, Will's own hips raised just enough for Hannibal to mount him.

Will kisses Alana in return when he pushes back inside of her, her walls drawing him in closer, deeper, as her hands flatten and curl around Will's nape. Hannibal nudges her fingers out of the way to bare Will's so-far-unblemished neck to his teeth again, worrying the sensitive flesh there to bruising but never breaking skin. The answering flood of endorphins and new position lets him spread Will's legs even wider than before, spearing Will open with the push of his cock and a possessive snarl of triumph.

The teasing appears to be over. Will moans as Hannibal finally fucks him with intent, ducking his head to mouth wetly over Alana's throat, breathing in raggedly the scent of sweet violets and salt-autumn forest on her skin. He can do little else; Hannibal seems determined to render Will incoherent, his pace nigh-punishing as he litters Will's back and throat and shoulders with the marks of his teeth and savage sucking bruises.

Alana's nails bite into his ribs and sides as Will thrusts into her, driven forward by Hannibal's force, her heart thundering against his, the groans of her pleasure buzzing low in her throat. Will laves over them with his tongue, blind against the secret haven of her collarbone, his fangs scraping against her scent glands in both instinctual provocation and hope. Posed as they are, his mouth must move for him where his fingers cannot, Will's hands supporting his weight as they clench in the sun-warm earth either side of Alana's head, tree roots cradling them both.

Dry leaves and twigs crack and are crushed in his fists, the top layer scraped away from the woods' undergrowth by Will's claws. Fine, shivering lines of yellow and white are revealed crawling through the ground beneath, embedded in the earth and seeming to pulse in Will's vision with the slow, sonorous beat of a giant's heart. *Fungi.*

Will gasps when, as if in response to his attention, the nearest clump of mycelium begins spreading rapidly in his direction, a small bloom of yellow that just touches the knuckle of his right little finger before Will snatches his hand away.

The teeth in Hannibal's smile press to Will's neck, leonine. "Is this not what you're searching for?"

"What?" Will asks him in confusion, trying to turn his head to stare at the other man, but is immediately distracted by further pale threads of mycelium emerging from under the leaves beside them, its growth unnaturally, alarmingly, fast.

Unnerved, Will tries to sweep away some of the top layer of ground cover with the side of his palms, hoping that disturbing the deadwood will also break some of the strands of hyphae creeping towards them. He is successful, but his actions only reveal *more* fungi that had been lurking out of sight, a gigantic beating web of mycelium on the forest floor with Will, Hannibal and Alana laying at its heart.

The mycelium knows the three of them are there: it responds to Will's efforts to stall its progress by growing around his discouraging fingers, blooming beyond reach of his arms into rings and rings of fungal caps and protrusions. They breathe as all living things do, expelling fine clouds of delicate spores that gleam like golden specks of dust in the sunlight.

Will tries to speak, to warn his lovers, as the mycelial network advances over the ground towards the three of them and the dancing breeze carries fungal spores their way, but neither Alana nor Hannibal seems to care. In fact, they seem more vexed that Will, in his distraction, has offered resistance between them, Hannibal's teeth on Will's neck turning reproachfully sharper until Will goes lax under him, Will's muscles softening instinctively and sending him tumbling down into the demanding grasp of Alana's arms.

She kisses him firmly, swallowing Will's words until Hannibal eliminates them entirely with the devastating angle of his thrusts. Fireworks light up at the back of Will's eyeballs even as spores speckle Alana's skin in his vision like the stars of a distant galaxy, the floating cells breathed in between their panting mouths. Will can feel them blooming in his lungs as he ruts forwards into Alana, her slick tightness constricting around him so that he is still moaning as he is dragged back onto the unyielding thrust of Hannibal's cock.

Will can feel every inch of Hannibal's length as it slides inside of him, exacerbated when Hannibal's palm spreads possessively across his belly, pulling Will back into him again and again. His hand sits broad and hot above Will's pelvis, increasing the pressure inside of Will until it feels as though Hannibal can fuck his own hand through Will's body, his cock striking every sensitive place inside of Will with ruthless precision.

Whisper-thin white filaments of fungi have woven themselves through the halo of Alana's hair on the forest floor, pale threads lovingly braiding with the darker strands of hair. Alana has breathed in the spores as well as Will, the gold carried deep into her lungs and onwards into her blood. Veins and arteries rush the insidious fungal light through the rest of Alana's body; when Will strokes fingers along her skin he can see the mycelial network pulse gold through the layers of her flesh.

The bioluminescence is widespread but still leaves patches of dimness on Alana's skin like islands in a delta or a cheetah's rosettes. Nature's camouflage. Room to grow. Alana is brightest where Will touches her and so her mouth glows like the pole star, guiding him to her for kiss after searching kiss even as the frills of oyster mushrooms erupt from the thin flesh around her eyes, behind her ears, tiny mushroom caps sliding up through the veins at her wrists. The webbing between her fingers grows delicate ribs that spawn fungal gills, ticklish as they smooth over Will's arm.

Will laughs at the tickling sensation even as his mind rebels, looking down at his arm to see that he is the same as Alana, alight with stars from the fungi's spores. They feel thick in his throat, in his lungs, heavy as they bloom ever further in his chest, replacing the rise and fall of each of his ribs under Alana's questing fingertips with curves of spongy fungus. And yet still, *still,* Will is helplessly, hopelessly, half-lost in arousal, the woods around him beating in time with the mycelial network, with the rapid pulse of his heart. The gold of his own irises has filled the world and left his vision hazy, and Hannibal's deep hard thrusts are punching gasps out of Will's throat before his infested lungs can take in any real air.

When Hannibal nuzzles into Will's sweaty hair from behind, Will lifts his head to try and warn him, beg for help, beg for *something,* but ends up merely leaning back and rubbing his cheek against Hannibal's as Hannibal rumbles in pleasure. Hannibal's hips snap forward as Will spreads his scent possessively over the other man's skin, Will twisting just enough afterwards so that he can smear a kiss over the mix of their oils on Hannibal's ridiculous jawline, licking the mingled taste off his lips until his whole mouth tingles with spice and fungal sap.

Hannibal is aglow as well, a web of mycelium coming up over his shoulders from behind like the cape of a king, and the blacks of his eyes have bloomed wide and dark like the psychedelic-addicts Will recalls seeing on the streets in his days as a cop. Will can see the gold of his own irises reflected back at him in the yawning chasms that are Hannibal's pupils, the pale spongy mould blossoming across one of his own cheeks, and he wants - he wants -

"Is this not what you're searching for?" Hannibal asks him again, and Will can only whimper.

Beneath them both, Alana moans and shudders as she comes. The sudden rippling tightness around Will's cock makes him hiss, and he ruts forward into Alana harshly, into the burst of her wet heat, lowering both himself and her to the ground where the ever-tightening web of mycelium immediately sets about fully covering them both.

Strands weave themselves tightly around Will's limbs and attach themselves to his skin with infinitesimally tiny, sucking tendrils, burrowing into organic material no matter whether it is wood, earth or human flesh. Will's hands digging into the living earth become entwined with Alana's body: he can feel the beat of her heart against his own as his breath shudders out of his lungs, and he can feel Hannibal's pulse against his spine, throbbing in Will's belly where Hannibal will now be forever buried inside of him. The three of them have been woven together and made a breathing part of the network, part of one great web that stretches out through the woods, under the earth, reaching and growing and so large Will's mind blurs trying to fathom it.

Endless.

Endless.

"See?" whispers the pulse in Will's ears, murmured in his voice, in Alana's, in Hannibal's.

The mycelial network smiles sweetly, kindly, and it uses their mouths to do so, uses Will's throat to contently purr, even as their flesh slowly melts together, grows mould, their eyes filming over.

"See?"

"Mankind," says Hannibal, "have a little corrupted nature, for they were not born wolves, and they have become wolves; God has given them neither cannon of four-and-twenty pounders, nor bayonets; and yet they have made cannon and bayonets to destroy one another."

Will blinks, blinks again, and -

Somewhere between heartbeats, Wolf Trap disappears and Will is -

Will is in the hospital. Right. Abigail's ward. Lying on the sofa, blanket over his shoulders. And Hannibal is sitting beside Abigail's bed, reading aloud from a book in one hand. The pedagogical Christ Pantokrator.

A sense of *dejá vu* is unavoidable, but there are certain, subtle but crucial, elements that are different to this scene from the one Will last remembers. He has been… dreaming. Dreaming. And the world has changed.

"'Annib'l?"

"Will." Hannibal looks up from his book, his lips curving upwards in a mild greeting that Will can almost - still - feel pressed with teeth against his neck. Oh fuck. (*Dreaming.*) "Good evening."

Still trying to reorient himself, Will pushes himself up with one arm and manages a muzzy, "S'it?" He feels flushed. Too hot.

"It is evening," Hannibal grants him, so Will hasn't been asleep for too long, "and I suppose if it is a good one or not depends entirely on your personal perspective."

Hannibal- Will's thoughts screech to a halt. When had he started thinking of Dr. Lecter as *Hannibal?* It's bad enough the beta has invaded his dreams in such a carnal manner without Will granting Lecter more ground in his waking life as well. Laxity with a man as troublesome as Lecter only invites more laxity, and the more impersonal Will can keep things between the two of them, the simpler his life should be. A clear border between his private life and his professional one should give Will easy rules to live by for both (*stop thinking about Dr. Lecter's dick* being chief among them), and the first and most important place Will needs to firmly draw the line is in the sanctity of his own head. A shield wall for his thoughts, for his self, rebuffing and redirecting the foreign winds that would disturb the waters of his mental stream.

(*No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love.*

Will shivers.

Some winds circle around.)

Will mulls over his personal perspective of the day as he notes the minute changes that have been made to Abigail's room whilst he slept: the new flowers, the change in light, and, of course, Dr. Lecter, glaringly unsubtle in a rich charcoal-coloured three-piece over a burnt red shirt. (Will doesn't even want to glance at Lecter's tie. Even at this distance and squinting, it looks almost offensively stripy.)

"...Alana?" Will delicately inquires, because it is better than saying *if you're trying to be sartorially noticeable, doctor, you might as well spare everyone's eyesight and take the clothes* off.

Lecter smiles like the goddamn sphinx, each and every one of his expressions a masterwork of minute details that Will actually has to *work* to interpret. It would be refreshing, if it weren't as equally as annoying at times. "She had to leave, I'm afraid. She would have said goodbye, but we were quite loath to wake you."

"Ah." Will sits up carefully in his seat, grateful - once more - for the blanket Alana had given him when the shift causes his cock to rub firmly against the already straining fabric of his trousers, pointedly reminding Will of its existence with a petulant *throb.* A lingering physical reminder of his dreams, there is no polite way for Will to adjust his hard-on or the familiar *stick* of his underwear with Lecter watching him - not that Will would feel comfortable adjusting himself in the presence of a teenage girl anyway, even if she *is* in a coma.

Hopefully, the strong scent of the hospital's cleaning supplies covers up the scent of Will's arousal. Hopefully.

Please, Will thinks blindly out at the universe, *don't let Lecter notice.* Will deserves that small mercy at least.

He nods his head stiffly towards Lecter's book, hoping to redirect some of the beta's focus as, under the blanket, Will tugs at one of the legs of his trousers, trying to create a little more room at the crotch. "That's not O'Connor."

"Alana did mention that she had had a conscious audience for her reading at one point," Lecter muses, one thumb tapping thoughtfully on the open pages before him. "No, this is Fleming's translation of *Candide.*"

"You're reading philosophy to a teenager?"

"Satire."

"Philosophical satire." And rather depressing philosophical satire at that. Will makes a face. "I suppose we should be grateful you chose a translation. Knowing you, you probably also have a copy in its original French."

Lecter's eyes crinkle at the corners when he really smiles, the ass dipping his head in what he probably thinks is a charming acknowledgement of being called out: *guilty as charged.*

So, the doctor has French in his repertoire along with Italian. Though the conversation is naturally leading him there, Will pointedly refrains from asking just how many languages Lecter actually knows - if only because the particular cant of Lecter's head as he regards Will suggests that Lecter *wants* to be asked.

Eyes fixed on Lecter's cheekbones, Will stares him down instead. Stubbornly.

At Will's blatant silence, Lecter's eyes crinkle further and his lips twitch: a response that would be, on nearly anyone else, an obviously stifled laugh. "In Voltaire's fingers, Anatole France once said, the pen runs and laughs."

"I think I've had enough of laughing pens today, thanks," Will says, and lets his sombre gaze drift over to Abigail. His arousal is dying ever more rapidly by the second (thank *God*). "I don't like the direction of their jokes."

"You speak of the *Birds of a Feather* article," Lecter says, and hums quietly when Will's head jerks in a nod. "If it is of any consolation, and if our dear friend, Dr. Bloom, has anything to say about it, the FBI will be making sure that the pen behind that piece will not be laughing for long."

"Some of the nurses were gossiping about it when I first arrived."

Again, the expression on Lecter's face shifts microscopically, a slight tic Will notes out of the corner of his eye that radiates - for this man - displeasure.

(*Good,* something in Will thinks selfishly, savagely, like recognising like and taking satisfaction in having its feelings vindicated by another feeling the same. *Good.*)

"Anyone I might perhaps know?" Lecter inquires lightly, closing his copy of *Candide* so he can put it away in the bag by the foot of his seat.

"Just some mouth on legs called Evie," Will says dismissively. "I thought your old stomping grounds were in the Emergency Room?" A conversation around Lecter's history in surgery had been almost impossible to avoid after the beta had so expertly saved Abigail's life.

Will had not been incorrect; Lecter's head dips again to confirm the truth of his recollection: *just so.*

"I like to believe I held some influence throughout the hospital's many departments in my time here," Lecter says without an ounce of shame (which, *annoyingly,* probably means Lecter's reputation is a good one in the hospital and thoroughly deserved), "and I have a good memory for people." He pauses, sitting upright again to ponder before adding, "I cannot, however, recall a nurse named Evie."

"Perhaps she's new," Will suggests.

"Or perhaps entirely unremarkable."

“Aside from spreading malicious gossip.” Will sighs, lifting one hand to tug the fingers through his sleep-tangled curls, letting his nails scrape back over his scalp and down over the itch of his nape. His neck still feels hot under his shirt’s loose collar, tingling with the memory of bites that never happened. “I told her to find another ward to work on else I’d report her.”

Hopefully the woman had listened, because tracking down her superiors to follow through on his threat just sounds *exhausting* to Will at the moment.

“That was quite charitable of you,” Lecter says neutrally, much more in control of his temper than Will had managed to be earlier in the day, “given the circumstances.”

“Last thing Abigail needs is a nurse with a serious vendetta against her because I got them in trouble at work.” Will gestures vaguely, not lifting the heel of his palm from his neck.

Lecter hums again. “I assume Dr. Bloom informed you that Abigail will not be remaining in this hospital for much longer?”

“She’s going to Port Haven. Yeah, I know.”

Hopefully Abigail will forgive them for making all these decisions for her when she finally wakes up. Or at least understand why they were made.

It’s important to Will. That she understands.

He grimaces and turns away from Abigail’s sleeping figure, changing the subject before Lecter can delve too deeply once more into the topic of homicidally-acquired daughters. “The FBI still has you bound with an NDA?”

“It does,” Lecter confirms, the faintest *edge* in his tone suggesting that he hopes Will isn’t proposing that *he* might be the FBI source for the *Birds of a Feather* piece.

That hadn’t been Will’s intention. Lecter is far too in control of both himself and his words to let something accidentally slip to a journalist, and releasing such private information deliberately would be beneath him as well, especially when any whisper of that kind of scandal associated with his name could be career suicide. Doctor-patient confidentiality is absolute, but it is even more absolute than usual when one’s patients rank amongst the rich and infamous of Baltimore society and its surrounding area.

“What do you know about mushrooms?” Will asks instead, and has the pleasure of catching Hannibal Lecter momentarily off-guard.

The beta blinks. Once. “Medicinally, gastronomically, biologically, or ecologically?”

“That’s a lot of *ally*s.” And Lecter can probably lecture on each one.

Will discreetly tugs at his trousers again. His erection has gone down (mostly), but his underwear is still clinging a little damply to the tender head of his cock and between the cheeks of his ass.

“He wasn’t picking them,” Will elaborates, because he’s not all too sure which of the categories Lecter listed to him would be of most interest to the killer that has infected his dreams. The Lecter in the false Wolf Trap had understood, caught up in the mycelium network with Will and Alana and completely unafraid, but Will had wanted release from him rather than revelations. “To eat, or anything else.”

‘“He’?” The Lecter of the conscious world isn’t slow on the uptake either, the keen mind behind his dark eyes rapidly cycling through several references before it alights on the one that Will is most likely alluding to. “Ah, the bodies in the woods.”

“Avid reader of *Tattlecrime*, doctor?”

“It has its uses,” says Lecter. Then: “You were asked to consult?”

Doesn’t ask: without the psych eval?

“I looked over the case file. An unofficial favour for a friend.” Will deliberately ignores Lecter’s knowing look; yeah, there are a lot of those unofficial favours going ‘round. “The unsub was cultivating mushrooms using his victims as fertiliser, but not for harvest. He kept his victims alive by feeding them intravenously, but only as long as it took for the fungus to grow.”

“The fungal growth was the desired result?”

Frustration bubbling over at the missing pieces to the puzzle, Will rises abruptly to his feet, taking his blanket with him as he paces over to the little ward’s window. This isn’t even his puzzle to *solve,* though a few flashes of the picture on the jigsaw box have burrowed their way into his subconscious regardless.

“I’m sure of it. But he just left his crop there. It seems pretty wasteful for someone who took the time to bury his victims in a straight line.” Will’s hand slices flat through the sunset light, dividing the world for a moment between red-gold and shadow. “Pretty maids all in a row.”

“A very contrary gardener.” Lecter leans back in his chair to think, hands folding serenely over his stomach. Will shudders - where the light catches the tiny hairs on the back of Lecter’s wrists, it seems like the beta might have stars beneath his skin. “There are more species of fungi, bacteria and protozoa in a single scoop of soil than there are species of plants and vertebrate animals in the whole of North America. And yet, animals are more closely related to fungi than any other kingdom - more than 600 million years ago we shared a common ancestry. The branch of fungi that eventually led to animals evolved to capture nutrients by surrounding their food with cellular sacs: essentially primitive stomachs.”

“We had stomachs before we had souls.” Abigail’s gentians have been shifted to the windowsill, the older bouquet moved to give way to the new. Will reaches out thoughtlessly, brushing light fingertips over bruised, tired petals. “Says something.”

“Hunger is and always has been a primary drive throughout nature.”

“And maybe fungi developed a more... efficient means of dealing with it than we have as a species.” Will catches a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye and glances over - Lecter, coming over to join Will at the window, step by openly curious step. “You said it yourself: fungi predates us, and it’ll probably survive us as well, devouring that which kills us and feeding that which forgets us.”

“Rising from the rot,” Lecter muses, “consumed by that which will also one day rot.”

“An ancient cycle of growth and decay,” Will says, and drops his eyes to the other man’s collar when Lecter looks at him directly.

(The stripy tie is worse than Will had originally thought.)

“Fungi are the grand recyclers of our planet,” Lecter says, hands tucked almost casually into his trouser pockets like he’d pry open Will’s skull with his nails if his hands aren’t otherwise occupied, “the interface organisms between life and death.”

Transgressive in Will’s mind’s eye, three bodies intertwined in the greater body of the woods, neither fully flesh nor fungi. He frowns, and Lecter takes it as prompt to go on.

“Mushrooms, as you asked about them, are merely the visible above-ground protrusions of sometimes vast underground networks of mycelium. They’re quite remarkable: mycelial nets have been shown to share the same architecture as that of astrocytic brain cells, both networks creating neurological pathways for distributing information as efficiently as possible.”

Will parses that. And then drops his hand from the gentians. “...Mushrooms are sentient.”

“Mycelial networks are arguably sentient. Of which mushrooms are a minuscule but visible part.” Lecter’s voice turns thoughtful. “An intricate web of connections.”

Crossing all boundaries, spanning for miles.

(“Is this not what you’re searching for?”)

Will considers that, looking away from Lecter entirely and out the window, noting but not particularly seeing all the people going about their business on the hospital paths below. “Maybe the unsub admires their ability to connect the way human minds can't.”

Leaning closer, Lecter follows the direction of his gaze - perhaps unconsciously, perhaps out of curiosity at what has caught Will’s interest, or perhaps simply trying to build rapport. He really can work this particular game as well as Will can. Better, maybe. “Yours can.”

Of *course* Lecter would bring that up. Will starts laughing, and Lecter’s reflection begins to smile along with him in the window-glass. “Not physically.” Lecter straightens again, a quick sliver of dark tongue smoothing out over his lips as he rests back on his heels. “Not with reciprocity.”

Never with reciprocity. Will’s smile fades.

“Is that what your gardener is looking for?” Lecter asks. The jackpot question. “Some sort of connection?”

The space between thoughts, between minds, between *people,* filled at last. Bridged by mycelium.

Will should call Beverly. He strides over to the couch to grab his cell in his jacket pocket - only for the blanket he’d forgotten he still had half-draped around his front and shoulders to finally give up the ghost and slide forwards and away from him when he bends over.

Will can feel himself turn pink. He’d forgotten about the blanket. He’d forgotten about it and been wearing it *all this time,* carrying it around like a child’s comfort blanket, his nose buried in the fabric that smells like -

Will frowns slightly, picking up the blanket from where it had fallen on the floor. The blanket doesn’t just smell like the hospital, like Will, and like Alana any more.

In fact - and Will turns his face into his shirt collar for a moment, just to sniff and check - *Will* doesn’t just smell like himself, the hospital, and Alana any more. Alana’s violet scent has almost entirely faded away, overpowered by a fresher burst of dry spice.

Cell forgotten, Will turns back sharply to Lecter. “Why do I smell like you?”

“I beg your pardon?” Lecter has the temerity to look surprised.

“I didn’t notice it until I moved away from you,” Will says, the hair on his arms and the back of his neck all prickling with disquiet, “but I *smell* like you. Your cologne’s pretty distinct.”

Nobody else Will knows smells anything like Lecter. (Nobody else Will knows could probably afford Lecter’s mix of body products and cologne.)

When had Lecter gotten close enough to *scent-mark* him? When Will had been asleep?

“I’ve been told it can be rather austere,” says Lecter, as if the issue here is his favoured blend of fragrance notes.

“Maybe,” says Will, and smiles with bared fangs. “You have to be *close* to smell the musk.”

Something in the rigidity of Will’s posture finally gets Lecter a clue, his expression softening with contrite solicitousness as the awareness of his trespass sinks in. “It seems I shall have to find a product with less sillage. Your blanket fell off a few times whilst you were sleeping, Will. My scent probably rubbed off on you when I placed it back around you.”

“Oh.” Will twists the blanket between his fingers, his anger at being marked without permission or knowledge dissipating into embarrassment.

Just *another* colleague tucking him in.

“I can understand how it must be disconcerting -”

“No,” says Will hastily, before Lecter can apologise for *being kind.* “Sorry. Uh- I’m just- It’s unusual. Normally, I just smell of myself and dogs.” He ducks his chin, self-conscious. “Thank you for your care.”

“It was my pleasure,” Lecter says with perfect courtesy, gentling the formality with a small smile. “Though might I suggest you may sleep better in your own bed, rather than on a hospital couch? Speaking as a former frequent occupier of those selfsame couches during shift-breaks from the ER, I know they can do terrible things to one’s back.”

Judging by the light, it *is* about time for Will to leave if he wants to get home before his dogs start doing their desperate need-to-pee dance at the door. Change his underwear before he has to scrape it off his ass. “No flexible days in your youth, huh?”

“You gaze upon the lumpy kin of their killer.” Lecter’s eyes really do gleam when he’s amused, Will catching them for a brief moment as he folds the hospital blanket and they both gather their things. It’s still insufferably attractive. “Come, we should get a coffee to wake ourselves up before our drives home.”

Will says goodbye to Abigail for the day with one last long look, following Lecter’s strides out of the room and towards the elevators. They fall easily in pace, the two of them, Will not having to either speed up or slow down from his usual walking speed to accommodate the man beside him.

“You said dogs,” Lecter asks offhand, “plural?”

“Very plural,” Will confirms. “I have seven. All former strays.”

To his credit, Dr. Lecter looks only a little surprised rather than judgemental. Will’s gotten pretty used to at least *some* kind of judgement when he tells people about the size of his pack, especially if they already know he’s not a shelter-owner or rehabilitator by trade.

“It speaks well of you to be able to look after so many,” Lecter says, a neat little compliment presented like it’s only a statement of fact.

“The original plan was to take them in, get them rehabilitated and then find them suitable homes elsewhere, but…” Will shrugs.

Despite the earlier compliment, he’s expecting a comment from Lecter about how omegas with smaller families or who live alone are often known for surrounding themselves with animals. *Developing and displaying their nurturing instinct*, to quote the academics. And the assholes.

“They’re family,” Lecter murmurs instead, and Will’s eyes fly wide as he turns his head to look at the beta. Struck.

“Yes,” says Will, and has to swallow around the sudden hoarseness of his throat. “Yes, that’s- they’re family.”

The hospital food court is quieter at this time of evening. Lecter buys their coffees, waylaying Will's protests by, firstly, getting Will's order right without any input from the omega, and then pronouncing that the drinks had been his idea in the first place. Grudgingly, Will concedes the battle, and takes the opportunity to shoot a text off to Beverly to see if the woman is still at work.

"Besides," Lecter says when he returns, offering Will one of the insulated cups in his hands with a wicked little twist to his mouth that suggests nothing good, "I believe the perks must at least *occasionally* be provided for one to categorise a relationship as friends-with-benefits."

Heat rushes to Will's cheeks, nothing to do with his coffee, but his response remains dry. "That would require us to be friends."

He's not even sure himself how he means that. Lecter looks amused anyway.

Outside, the cawing of the crows greets them as the birds finish their business for the day and return to their nests. Dark feathered shadows flap between the paths, shrubs and trees surrounding the hospital, occasional blurs overhead that Will squints at to see against the twilight sky.

Lecter's tread is quiet beside him. The tilt of his head contemplative as he joins Will in looking up at the sky. "'The crows above the forest call;/ Tomorrow they may form and go./ O hushed October morning mild,/ Begin the hours of this day slow.'"

Will looks at him askance, trying to put a finger on the sudden feeling that wells up inside of him when the line of Lecter's profile is distractingly damn near statuesque. "You know Frost?"

"We are all of us a little guilty at times of wishing a moment could last forever," is Lecter's oblique reply, before turning the question back on Will. *Psychiatrists.* "You're a fan of his work?"

"I appreciate his sincerity. He uses all the old, classic metres, but writes like he's just having a conversation with the reader. Just some regular guy, not too high-brow. Says with perfect simplicity exactly what he sees, and makes it mean more by the arrangement. It's refreshing."

Lecter muses over that for a moment or two. "Yes, I can see it might be. Do you prefer modern poetry in general?"

"Am I scandalising the Voltaire?" Will teases, taking a sip of his coffee and tipping his head towards Lecter's bag. *Candide,* really. "I'll read anything, doesn't matter what."

"Yes," says Lecter. Then: "You're rather more intelligent and well-read than you care for people to assume you are."

The sweetness of the sugar in his drink quickly fades from Will's tongue, and his mouth twists down into something bitter and warning. He's not in the mood for this after a long day. "Careful, Dr. Lecter; you're veering dangerously close to psychoanalysis again." Will's

phone buzzes in his pocket, and, still rather acrimonious about the turn the conversation has taken, he fishes it out, adding, “I’m not accountable for other people’s assumptions.”

“Indeed you are not, but, you must admit, the way you choose to present yourself veers towards being deliberately misleading.” Will raises his eyebrows, all but challenging the doctor to elaborate on that, but Lecter gracefully backs down, turning his gaze to the watch on his wrist rather than to the dig of omega claws into Will’s coffee cup, to the mutinous set of Will’s jaw. “I’m afraid I must take my leave of you now.”

“Oh, *must* you?” Will inquires, *sotto voce.*

“Alas,” says Lecter, as though Will cannot *hear* the amusement so richly colouring his voice, “I have a prior engagement. But I thank you for the fascinating conversation, as always. *À bientôt,* Will."

Will doesn’t say goodbye - but he doesn’t say *fuck off* either, raising a single hand in a farewell gesture over his shoulder as he turns and heads in the direction of his car, uncaring if Lecter sees it or is ready to leave himself.

The buzzing had been a text from Beverly: *yes,* she is still stuck at Quantico. Jack is riding the team’s asses hard since the latest victim may still be alive. Alive and slowly dying of diabetic ketoacidosis.

Will calls her instead of texting back, following up her greeting with a brisk, “Any luck with your gardener?”

“You better be calling to be useful, Graham,” says Beverly, which answers the question even before she sighs: “No, no luck with finding Stammets *or* our vic. Priority on the vic: one Gretchen Speck, beta female, aged 30. Diabetic. We got the plates for Stammets’ new vehicle but no hits, and the dog teams are still out searching in Elk Neck State Park.”

“His new garden might not even be there,” Will says.

“That’s been considered already, but the higher-ups deemed it worth a try. Do you know how many state parks and wild areas there are around Maryland?” Beverly demands. “Not to mention other forested land. If you don’t already know, you don’t *wanna* know. Jimmy’s still drawing up the list.”

Will couldn’t name the exact acreage, but just thinking about trying to trawl through the forested land north-east and west of Baltimore by foot gives him a headache. “Stammets won’t run too far from what he knows, where he knows the earth and what’s under it. He’s- he’s looking for *connection,* trying to help people connect.”

“By *killing* them?”

“The deaths are incidental- I’m not even sure he sees the life departing the shells of his victims *as* death. He was encouraging the mushrooms to grow because the victims, their lives… these people live on in the fungi that grows on their bodies. In the more expansive

mycelial network. Their thoughts, their feelings, the connections between them all, buried and breathing as one."

On the other end of the line, Beverly is silent for long enough Will worries his remarks have creeped her out enough she's gone for psychiatric back-up.

"Bev?" Will asks, just in case.

"Here," she says promptly, and Will's shoulders droop with relief. "Sorry - just writing a note. I am never going to be able to eat my boyfriend's mushroom risotto ever again."

"Good risotto?"

"One of his specialities." Beverly sighs again, and, in the background, Will hears Zeller let out a curse, Price murmuring something afterwards. More destruction in the lab. "Your *Tattlecrime* lead bore fruit, by the way."

Will reaches his volvo at last, sliding inside after unlocking it and depositing his coffee in the cupholder. "You found the leak already?"

"No, Jack's gonna press Lounds about that later. We found *Tattlecrime.* At Stammets' workstation. Seems he'd been reading the blog just before he went home."

"It tipped him off." Will frowns, leaning back in his seat. He doesn't envy the *Tattlecrime* writer who is going to be face to face with Jack's ire rather soon, but the woman absolutely deserves it. She had exposed a victim to the public's wrath *and* fucked up an ongoing investigation, all in the same day.

...God, with that leak, *Tattlecrime* probably has more information about the FBI losing Stammets than Will does.

"Bev, he's going to keep trying to- to *help* people connect unless he's stopped."

"We'll get him," Beverly promises, reassuring in her absolute confidence. "Jimmy's got a long list of paperwork he wants to crush him to death with."

"*Peine forte et dure* is a little too Salem these days, isn't it?" Will asks, making a mental note about Price's apparent fondness for medieval torture methods. "Though they blame the fungi for that one now too."

"If you tell me Stammets thinks he's a witch now as well- *what?"* Beverly asks when Will makes an amused noise into his phone. "You think anyone's gonna be surprised if this case gets even weirder? We have a serial killer who's uploading diabetics to a mushroom cloud because he has no friends."

There's a pause, and, in the silence, Will hears Beverly and himself reach the same thought at the same time. He lets Beverly have it, slotting the new query into the larger puzzle of the case in his mind.

"...Will," she asks slowly, clearly turning her words over herself, "who is Stammets trying so hard to be friends with?"

Chapter End Notes

Rissole: (from French *rissoler*, 'to redden/to make red') a small savoury patty enclosed in pastry, or rolled in breadcrumbs, usually baked or deep fried. Can be served as an entrée, main course or side dish.

Alana (canonically!) reads *A Good Man is Hard to Find* to Abigail in the hospital, which is a questionable decision for all the reasons Hannibal points out in this. Hannibal reads *Candide* here, because Hannibal is exactly the sort of person who'd take a 'cheerful' philosophical satire criticising the belief in a benevolent God (amongst other things) to read to someone whose serial killer father tried to kill them. It's just as questionable (see: terrible) a choice as Alana's, and yes, *Hannibal knows this*. However, it does, arguably, have a better take-away for the ending. (God's one thing, but you gotta fix your own shit.)

The 'rose galaxy': actually a pair of interacting galaxies, that form the shape of a rose.

The 'gruelling adagio' Hannibal decides to make a pretentious metaphor about is the 'Rose Adagio' from the ballet of *The Sleeping Beauty*, wherein Princess Aurora dances with four suitors in turn (who each present her with a rose). It's known in ballet for being very tough on the ballerina dancing Aurora, as it's a long dance where the ballerina spends a lot of time *en pointe* - and at one point must remain rigidly *en pointe* as a suitor gently turns her on the spot, before letting go of her partner's hand, still balanced, and taking the hand of the next suitor to do the same thing. All whilst making it look like her own effortless decision. (There are some good videos online.)

Mushroom/fungi/mycelium chatter is largely taken from and inspired by the work of the mycologist Paul Stamets (the real life inspiration for Eldon Stammets in the show, as well as a scientist in *Star Trek: Discovery*), in particular his book, *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World*. Paul Stamets also has some published works on psilocybin mushrooms, and growing mushrooms for gourmet and medicinal purposes that I feel Hannibal would be interested in.

Hannibal quotes an excerpt from Robert Frost's *October* to Will outside the hospital. It can be assumed that Will likes Frost's poetry: he has a copy of some of Frost's work on his bookshelves at home, and he's particularly quick to correct Zeller in *Coquilles* when Zeller mistakes Beverly's quoting of Jim Morrison/The Doors for Frost. (More eagle-eyed fannibals than me have more to say about Will's bookshelves here.)

Peine forte et dure ('forceful and hard punishment') was a method of torture wherein defendants who refused to enter a plea in a common law court were slowly starved and crushed to death until they entered a plea (guilty/not guilty) or died. The only person

who died in American history due to *peine forte et dure* was Giles Corey, who was pressed to death in 1692 during the Salem witch trials for refusing to enter a plea after being accused of witchcraft.

That's all for now. Stay safe, all, be kind, and wash your hands.

confit

Chapter Summary

> Will makes several bad decisions, least of all talking himself into being kidnapped. The Mushroom Gardener case comes to a close.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Morning the next day starts with a misty drizzle. Rather than bounding off into the fields, Will's pack mills restlessly around his legs when he opens the front door for them, and he has to click his tongue to even get them out onto the porch. Once reluctantly outside, the damp of the air convinces them all that, if they *must* be subjected to this weather, they might as well venture beyond the porch's cover and relieve their aching bladders, all of the dogs conducting their business as quickly as possible before returning to press themselves pathetically against Will's calves, begging for warmth.

Will gives them each a quick towel-dry and wipes their paws before letting them back into the house one by one, shivering himself by the time he's finished and can make his way inside for a hot - *hot* - cup of coffee.

Somewhere between breakfast - toast -, getting dressed and getting into his car, the sun decides to show for the day, late to wake and resentful about it. The glare of it catches Will right in the eyes just as he pauses at a stoplight, the bright sunbeam arrowing straight and sharp to the back of his skull. Will flinches and yanks his sun-visor down but the damage has already been done - a headache slamming itself behind Will's eyes quicker than the stoplight turning green. It's painful enough he has to pull over a little while later, before he's even out of Wolf Trap proper, and shake himself out some aspirin to swallow dry. The bitter chalky taste is yet *another* reminder that Will really ought to keep a bottle of water in his car, something to wet his mouth and wash pills down with rather than more of the crap Quantico likes to pass off as coffee - which, when consumed in large enough quantities, gives Will the jitters of the tired, overworked and over-caffeinated by the end of the day.

The breakfast trays are still being cleared away in the wards when Will arrives at the hospital. Except for cleaning, there's not much call for the housekeepers in the rooms where the patients are all comatose, but the homely rattle of regathered plates and cutlery still sounds somewhere down the hallways, marking the linear passage of time in a building that otherwise feels utterly removed from the concept.

The breeze in the halls smells a little like cheap coffee and a lot like sadly burnt toast. Other more hormonal scent-tracks in the air, marking the comings and goings of people, are largely obliterated by the fresh application of strong scent-deadening cleaning supplies - which

makes the patch of *rank* rotten air Will steps into just outside of Abigail's ward all the more startling.

The smell is an olfactory slap to the face, as ripe and mulchy as the result of a dog's diarrhoea in a field of wet mouldering grass. It is, thankfully, not (and Will braces his hand on the nearest wall and lifts his feet up one at a time to check just in case) something Will has tracked into the hospital on his shoes, but the odour is particularly terrible in an otherwise pristine environment, like a small drowned something trapped and rotting on a blockage of leaves down a drain.

"You should be up and about pretty soon," Will jokes to Abigail as he enters her room. "A smell like that could wake the dead."

Or at least it could if Abigail *were* in her room. When Will lifts his eyes from his own feet it is to discover the girl's bed is empty, its sheets still rumpled, the machines surrounding it switched off with wires trailing over both mattress and floor.

Sloppy.

A needle of disquiet pierces Will sharp in the chest, and he turns on his heel to do a quick jog to the nurse's station.

He's a familiar enough face on the floor they don't even ask to see his badge any more. "The girl in 408, Abigail Hobbs. Where is she?"

The nurse at the station smiles at him; the bad smell must have not reached her yet. "Oh, they just took her for tests."

Will frowns, his unease growing. "What tests?"

Alana would not have started moving Abigail from John Hopkins if there were still important tests to be done.

"Uh," the nurse flounders, casting about on the desk in front of her for something she apparently cannot find, "I could have sworn I just had the paperwork here a minute ago..."

Sloppy.

"Who took her?" Will demands.

"I don't- I'm sorry," the nurse dithers, still unable to find the paperwork, before pointing down the busy hall towards one of the sets of elevators, different from the ones Will had rode up in. "They *just* took her; you should be able to catch them up."

There is, in fact, still someone in green scrubs waiting at the elevators, an occupied gurney at their side.

Abigail.

Something is wrong. Will's mind is very firmly telling him something is wrong here, though it refuses to provide him with any definite reasons for his disquiet, even as Will jogs in the least paranoid-looking manner he can manage towards the elevators. The rank smell of death and rot is still in his nose as his shoes hit the linoleum (*something is wrong-wrong-wrong*), and the elevator arrives when Will is still too far away to catch it.

The compartment is empty. The person in scrubs pushes the gurney inside, and turns around to press the button for their floor - making eye-contact with the running Will as they do so.

There is nothing remarkable to look at about the man in the elevator. Just another member of staff in his scrubs. He is of average height, middle-aged, plain-faced and forgettable. His ID is turned against his chest, so Will cannot even see the blur of his picture.

An awful understanding reaches Will's mouth before his brain.

"Stammets?" he calls.

In the elevator, the man's eyes widen in response, his back straightening.

Recognition.

The elevator doors slide shut.

Will all but crashes into them a few seconds later, too late for his smacking of the call button to do any good.

The elevator is going down, so Will sprints for the stairs, reaching into his trousers to grab his revolver as he goes. He has no idea what floor Stammets plans to get off at so Will has to burst out of the stairwell at each landing, pushing past patients and medical staff who all look at him like he's crazy when he checks to see if the elevator has stopped on that floor and, when he realises it hasn't, dashes back to the stairwell again.

Will takes the stairs down into the bowels of the hospital, leaping several steps at a time. There's a wounded beast inside his chest howling with Garret Jacob Hobb's voice - *Abigail, Abigail, Abigail!* - and *oh,* that *fucking* article on *Tattlecrime-!*

When he stumbles out the stairwell door on the basement level Stammets is just about to turn a corner further along the deserted corridor, pushing the gurney carrying Abigail ahead of him.

Will raises his gun and manages a winded, "Eldon? Eldon Stammets?" if only because he needs to cover his own ass before shots are fired -

And a shot *is* fired, ringing off the wall above his head.

Will dives back behind the stairwell door again. *Well, that definitely answered* that *question.* "Eldon -"

"I'll shoot her if I have to. I will!"

Stammets is panicking, and panic is never a good thing when there are hostages and guns involved. He needs to calm down - *Will* needs to calm him down, because Stammets has the advantage here. Stammets has Abigail, and if Will doesn't do something he'll kill her now or kill her slowly, taking her away and burying her, leaving her to rot away in her sleep. Not giving her the honour she deserves -

"I'd rather you didn't, Eldon," Will calls as calmly as he can manage, determinedly strangling the cry of Abigail's father in his throat. "That won't help Abigail, and I know how much you want to help her."

If Abigail dies at the hands of another, it's *murder;* it doesn't *matter* how they do it.

Keeping his gun in his dominant hand, Will reaches into his pocket to retrieve his cell, setting it to silent and tapping it to call Beverly - currently top in his calls list.

Stammets is suspicious. "You do?"

"Why do you think I followed you, Eldon?" Will asks him, deliberately trying to build rapport with the man along the corridor. If Stammets wants connection - to build connections, to *be* connected - then here, *here* is a connection. Will. A connection with Will, rather than the too-vulnerable Abigail. "I understand. About the mushrooms- the fungi. And us. We all evolved from the same place."

"Opisthokontum," Stammets explains, still sounding too wary for Will's comfort. "A super kingdom of animalia and fungi together."

"You've been helping us reconnect," says Will. Taking a deep breath, he adds, "It takes a lot of work to reconnect a kingdom all by yourself, Eldon."

"I've had help."

Uh. Looking at the photographs of Stammets' garden, Will hadn't *felt* the presence of a second killer in his vision of the scene. But he could have been wrong. Will's mental reconstructions are heavily informed by the evidence in front of him and his own experience - but evidence *can* be misleading, and Will's mind fills the gaps in the knowledge that is available to it with the assumptions that are most logical.

Assumptions can be dangerous, Will reminds himself, so clarifies: "The people you've helped already?"

"They understand now," Stammets says, with the voice of the fervently devout. Great. People are the hardest to dissuade when they have something to believe in. "All of them."

Stammets had acted alone.

Will bites his lower lip a moment, considering the wisdom of his next question - and then asks it anyway. "Didn't the FBI dig them all up?"

Stammets' suspicion promptly ratches itself up a few notches again. "Are *you* FBI?"

A dangerous question to answer. “I-” Will glances down at his phone again. The call’s connected, so Beverly *better* be getting this - “I’m coming out now, Eldon, okay?”

“I’ve got a gun!”

“I think you noticed, so do I.”

“Throw it down the hall, away from us.”

Crouching down on his haunches and extending his hand out cautiously from the safety of the stairwell, Will does so.

“And your phone.”

Will sends his cell out skittering to join his revolver - still on the line with Beverly. (If this encounter damages his phone, he’s sending the bill for repairs or a replacement straight to the bureau.)

“I’m coming out now,” Will repeats, and really hopes he isn’t about to get shot.

He leaves the stairwell again, step by careful step, trying to look as harmless as possible with his empty hands held up in front of him. His palms won’t stop a bullet if Stammets chooses to shoot, but, if he must martyr himself, he might as well get something like the stigmata for the endeavour.

Stammets is still standing where Will saw him last, by Abigail’s gurney at the corner. Gun raised at Will.

He doesn’t say anything, and Will can feel Stammets’ gaze flicking over him, suspicious eyes like frantic ants.

Will’s smiles have never been soothing things, but he has the benefit of his dynamic to aid him as he walks towards Stammets as non-threateningly as he can manage, his scent spilling out into the air: placatorily sweet, yielding. Chin lifted, belly and throat exposed: all say *no danger here.*

“I’m Abigail’s friend, Will. Will Graham.”

The barrel of Stammets’ gun drops slightly, no longer a kill shot.

“You’re an omega,” he says. Wondering.

“All my life,” Will confirms.

“Is that why you understand? You’re an omega?”

“I think it’s just a me thing,” Will says, emphasising the *me*.

From what Will can tell, Stammets is a beta - and most likely full of all the common beta assumptions about omegas. God forbid he get it into his head that omegas and their supposed

naturally nurturing empathetic instinct are the answer to all his woes. *Abigail* is omega, and Will would like to direct Stammets' attention away from her.

"I'm very good at understanding. People. Concepts. Connections."

Not completely gullible, Stammets moves back when Will moves within lunging distance, placing the gurney - and Abigail - between them.

Will wants to put his hands around the other man's throat and *squeeze.*

Abigail's hair is a bit of a mess from her move, and the lights overhead wash her skin a sickly colour, but she appears to be otherwise unharmed.

"Did you read about her in *Tattlecrime?"* Will asks, nodding his head casually towards the girl. Informality, to foster accord. "They write some real bullshit. Didn't think much of their article about my friend. Didn't think much about their article on *you,* either."

Stammets' gun drops even further, hope warring with his wariness.

Loneliness and desperation can make fools out of even the smartest of people.

It would still be too awkward for Will to try and tackle him over the gurney, over Abigail. "They didn't understand what you'd done, what you're trying to do. *I* do. I can see it. The way you're joining people to the mycelial network, helping them expand their minds and reach out the way they couldn't before."

Stammets lights up at Will speaking his language: *sold.* "If you walk through a field of mycelium, they know you are there, they know you are there! The spores reach for you as you walk by. These people I plant - they become *more.* They can finally reach *back.*"

"I know, Eldon." Will feels safe enough to finally lower his hands, letting them rest on the gurney in front of him, fingers brushing over and seeking reassurance from the warmth of Abigail's arm.

Marking her, however slightly, with traces of his own scent.

To Stammets, it looks like Will is reaching out to him. And Will *is,* deliberately holding the other man's attention on him, only him, to keep Stammets from taking Abigail away to bury beside his other current victim, Gretchen Speck.

Gretchen Speck, who may still be alive.

Buried where only Stammets knows where to find her.

Will already regrets what he's about to suggest. But - with the hospital still quiet around them and no signs of any cavalry about to arrive -, he can't think of a better idea. "I haven't seen it yet though. Would you show me?"

"Show you?" asks Stammets, and seems genuinely confused.

The beta *really* isn't used to bonding with other people.

"Yes," says Will, and smiles as charmingly as he can through gritted teeth. "Show me your work? Not Abigail," he adds hastily when Stammet's gaze drops contemplatively towards the gurney, yanking the beta's eyes straight back to him.

Stammets frowns so Will goes on, coaxing, "I just don't think she's ready yet. She's got other healing to do first, before her mind can be opened to something like this. Besides, wouldn't people ask questions watching you put a comatose girl into your car?"

Stammets considers it for a while (*please let this work*), but the hope of finally having someone to understand him, finally having someone truly reach out to him, eventually wins out over his doubts, as Will had known it would.

Leaving Abigail, and Will's gun and phone, in the corridor, Stammets guides Will out through a nearby exit and towards his new station wagon, the vehicle parked in a dark spot out of sight of any of the hospital's CCTV cameras. Stammets keeps his gun trained on Will at all times, motioning for Will to take the driver's seat so he can direct Will from the front passenger side.

Will had - mildly - hoped that Beverly, and thus the rest of Jack's team, might have figured out his location and summoned the troops before Will drives Stammets and him out of the hospital car park, but, with no flashing lights on the horizon except the morning glare of sunlight off the streets of downtown Baltimore, Will is forced to go along with his own rather hazardous back-up plan.

...He's probably not going to make it to his before-lunch class at the Academy. Hopefully *someone* will tell his students that, because their passive-aggression (probably quite rightfully) knows no bounds when Will has to cancel their classes last-minute.

Stammets directs Will on which turns to take and how fast Will should go, heading north out of the city, but mostly they drive in silence, classic country interspersed with advertising jingles playing softly on the radio.

Despite the gun, Stammets seems to be all but *basking* in Will's presence, his expression aglow with the simple joy of having company at last. The part of Will that understands Stammets feels bad for leading him on, but Will strangles those emotions quickly before they can blossom, the whisper of *Abigail* and what Stammets had almost done to her enough to justify Will's ruthlessness.

They take a circuitous route, but eventually cross the Susquehanna river as though heading for Elk Neck State Park, the location of Stammets' original garden. However, rather than directing Will south afterwards, towards Elk Neck Forest and the park beyond it, Stammets has Will go north and onto the highway, crossing the state border into Delaware. It's not long after that Will sees the signs for White Clay Creek State Park, and is unsurprised to be told to follow them, taking the wagon into the park and, some while later, off a patch of deserted road and into the trees.

Branches scrape off the vehicle's paintwork as Will drives as carefully as he can between the tree trunks, the wagon bouncing as the wheels go over the dips and bumps of the forest floor. Stammets knows his path well; Will can see no obvious markers on their path, but Stammets guides him confidently to go left and right at certain trees and bushes, when to hug close against a fallen trunk because there's apparently a bear trap set under the leaves to the right.

"That doesn't seem very friendly," Will comments lightly as he dutifully hugs the line of the fallen tree with the station wagon.

"My work shouldn't be disturbed," Stammets says rather fretfully. "The ignorant- they don't *understand.* Humans, we share the same properties as fungi. Our thoughts can pass from brain to brain, mutating, *evolving.* I'm helping us along."

Their final destination is a small shaded copse, ringed nearly all the way around with fearsome bushes. Will *definitely* scratches the wagon's paintwork taking them past the barrier and parking the wagon, but Stammets doesn't so much as wince, gesturing with his gun for Will to get out.

Will does so - though not before clarifying that there are no more bear traps lying around for him to wander into.

"Not *here,*" he is told rather testily, and so Will decides he's probably safe to take a few steps away from the station wagon, stretching his limbs and rubbing at an ache in his chest that had been bothering him since they crossed the state border, though he hadn't then dared to take his hands off the wheel.

In the shade, the ground is still damp and springy underfoot, and Will's shoes sink slightly into the earth beneath the bright carpet of fall leaves. The air is fresh and lovely with the scent of the living forest, earth and oak and pine, and Will can hear a chickadee calling out somewhere in the branches above him, a two-note *fee-bee* distinct over the background drift of birdsong.

The 'garden' is set up much like it had been in Elk Neck, though, this time, only one burlap sack rises up from the forest floor, protecting what is almost definitely Gretchen Speck's forearm from passing wildlife. There are no mushrooms emerging from the soil covering Speck's body yet, not that Will can see, which gives him hope that, if organ failure hasn't already taken her, Speck may survive the trip to hospital.

Two more shallow graves have been freshly dug in a row beside Speck's grave. They yawn open on the forest floor like dark, wet hungry mouths, waiting to be filled.

One of these graves had been intended for Abigail.

The tips of Will's shoes are brushing the lip of one of the graves before he has even realised he was walking towards it - the freshest one, still with the shovel used to dig it lying in the earth at the bottom.

Stammets had probably been digging earlier that morning, before heading to John Hopkins. Hurrying to get things ready for his new guest.

Will cannot look away from the black hole in front of him. *L'appel du vide.* Before he can fall, he jumps, crouching down until the sides of the grave rise up around him, his fingers burying themselves in the wet earth beneath him, around him.

There are graves behind Will's eyes still when he closes them, the darkness swelling with the pulse of the earth under Will's palms, the beating heart of a network that is at once both too vast and too small for Will to see.

In the darkness, in the rush of Will's pulse… something reaches *back.*

"See?" Stammets asks him, and, disturbed, Will's eyes fly open again to see the beta's eager face looming over him, Stammets crouched down on the edge of the grave Will is in. He smells like rot. "Do you see it now?"

For a moment, Will wonders if, had he officially been part of the investigation into Stammets' crimes, things would have still turned out the same way. If Stammets might have still gone after Abigail. If Will might have still talked himself into - essentially - being kidnapped.

If Will might have still ended up almost on his hands and knees in a fresh shallow grave, with a deluded serial killer standing over him.

"I can see it," Will says, dirt under his nails, the scent of the soil and everything living in it caught up his nose. "I can *feel* it."

Stammets' face wreathes itself in a smile. He's happy, so *happy,* to be understood, and Will feeds on it and feeds it back up to Stammets with a smile of his own.

Stammets' grip on his revolver has gone lax in his distracted joy.

When he stands and turns his back on Will, looking back to the car, Will picks up the shovel beside him with both hands, considers the heft of it, and swings it hard into Stammets' legs.

There is a *crack,* and Stammets falls backwards - directly into the grave behind him. Dropping his gun. Will catches part of the other man as he falls, unintentionally slowing Stammets' descent, but Stammets still hits the ground hard, his back hitting the dirt before his head follows after with a nasty *thump*.

Silence.

In its hidden place in the nearby trees, the chickadee cries *fee-bee* once more, and then flies away in a rustle of leaves and flutter of wings.

One hand still gripping the shovel, Will touches his fingers to Stammets' neck. There's a pulse, so Will throws Stammets' gun and the shovel out of the grave and clambers out after them, heading back to the station wagon for the supplies Stammets undoubtedly has in it.

The trunk is full of stinking compost that Will rather quickly slams the lid closed on again, but the floor behind the driver's seat yields some lumpy sacking. When Will looks inside of

the bags he finds a tangle of catheters, IV tubing, rebars and twine, the very last of which he grabs and takes back to Stammets.

The beta starts coming around, groaning, just as Will is finishing tying up his ankles with the twine to match his already bound wrists.

Stammets' eyes are a weak, watery blue, watering even further with tears of frustration and pain.

"You said you understood me," he slurs, when he sees Will hovering over him.

He should've stayed unconscious. It's not an open injury, but Will has likely broken - or at the very least fractured - at least one of Stammets' legs.

"I do," says Will, rifling through Stammets' pockets for a phone and failing to find one. "You're the one that mistook that for acceptance."

Will leaves Stammets in the grave he dug himself, weeping and stupid with pain.

Really, the beta shouldn't be left alone after his head injury, but trying to move Stammets from the hole in the ground and into the station wagon could complicate whatever's wrong with his legs. The last thing Will needs is to turn his captive's potentially minor breakage into a compound fracture and have Stammets die of either blood loss or infection before trial.

Will doesn't disturb Speck at all, save to check for a pulse in the pale wrist underneath the nearby sack. He finds one, weak, fast, and fluttering, and it's all the motivation Will needs to move the weapons and then get straight back into the station wagon.

He drives back through the forest at twice the speed he went in, heedless of the bumps and scratches he subjects Stammets' vehicle to. His route is probably not *perfectly* accurate to the one Stammets had guided him in by, but Will manages to avoid any hidden pitfalls or traps, emerging out onto the road again. He marks the spot, then heads immediately to the nearest building he can see signposted - which turns out to be the park's Nature Centre.

Clearly more accustomed to young families, the centre workers are a little startled when Will bursts in through their door. They go as wide-eyed as the stuffed owl in their display when Will brings out his badge to show them - one of the few *useful* items Stammets hadn't made Will throw away.

"Special Agent Will Graham, FBI. I need to use your phone."

By the time Jack arrives on the scene, Will has been back in the copse holding Stammets' second garden for at least an hour, ambulances and law enforcement with him. Stammets has

already been taken away (with two broken legs of differing severity and a definite concussion), and Will has explained himself at least two and a half times to various individuals from local law enforcement, half an eye always fixed on the careful exhumation of Gretchen Speck. The lights of the crime scene photographers' cameras are giving him a headache, each white flash a burst of pain inside his skull.

Jack finds Will just as Speck is being loaded into an ambulance, the profiler tucked away in the back of a car to the side of the chaos, a bottle of water and a particularly stubborn paramedic who won't leave him be keeping him company. The omega woman has, despite all Will's protests, insisted Will be draped in a shock blanket, and keeps reaching over between every few sips of water Will takes to measure his pulse.

"My last *girlfriend* didn't want to hold hands as much as you do," Will grumbles into his bottle as the paramedic commandeers his wrist for the *n*th time.

She smells like salt and apple blossoms. Really stubborn apple blossoms.

"Her loss, I'm sure," the paramedic says blandly, which is probably a nicer response than her threatening Will with the blood pressure cuff again instead.

Officials elsewhere already interrogated, Jack is there before Will can answer her, large and looming and towing Price along in the wake behind him. Apple blossoms fade under a wave of cedar, pepper and patchouli, and Will's nose itches.

"You're *supposed* to be keeping out of the field."

"Technically," Will says, screwing his water bottle closed, "this is a forest."

Jack doesn't laugh, switching his attention for a moment to Will's helicopter paramedic. "He fit to give a statement?"

Will sighs. "*Yes,* Jack."

Behind Jack, Speck's ambulance peels out of the copse, lights and siren clearing the way.

"Your heart rate is a little faster than I'd like," the paramedic informs Will, which earns her points in his book for not talking over his head despite how much of a nuisance he's been to her.

"Weak?" Will asks her, and, when she shakes her head, determines, "Then I'm not going to faint, I promise you. Look," he lifts the edges of the fleecy orange monstrosity she had insisted he be swaddled in, "I'm not in shock. I have a blanket."

The look the paramedic gives him is withering, but she leaves after one last stern instruction for Will to eat lunch sooner rather than later - a reminder that yes, Will has missed his morning class, and is probably well into missing the first of the classes he should be teaching that afternoon.

The indignant emails are, no doubt, already piling up in Will's inbox.

“Speck gonna be okay?” Will asks Jack, giving up on the pretence that the alpha’s team hadn’t kept him fairly abreast of the investigation.

Will knows Jack knows Will knows about the case, and it’s far too tiring for Will to pretend otherwise with a pounding headache - even if Price does give Will a tragic look over the little pen and notebook he’s brought out to record whatever Will has to say.

Price should be the one taking Will’s statement, omega male to omega male, so that Will is relaxed and calm as he recounts events.

“She’s headed for a long stay in the ICU,” Jack says, his gaze heavy on Will’s head, “but there’s hope, thanks to you. She why you let him take you?”

“He did have a gun on me, Jack,” Will says, keeping his own eyes level with the pin of the other man’s tie, letting the weight of his water bottle roll from hand to hand.

Nobody says, though it’s heard regardless: *in the hospital, so did you.*

“He was gonna take Abigail,” Will explains. “I could’ve maybe - *maybe* - brought him down there, in Baltimore, but there was no guarantee he would’ve told us where Speck was buried. So I convinced him to take me instead.”

“How?”

“Told him I understood him.”

Jack *hmph*s. “Do you?”

Will lets his eyes slide away from Jack’s tie, out to the yellow-green-orange of the woods. He can’t hear the birdsong any more, or the wind in the trees - just people, talking. Cameras snapping. Engines revving as a wheel gets stuck in the mud.

“There are a lot of similarities between humans and fungi, but fungi - the mycelium all around us in the earth - can connect in a way people currently can’t. Stammets was trying to connect to people, and to help people connect.”

Jack *hmph*s again, apparently unimpressed.

“Hasn’t he heard of Tindr?” Price asks. Then, as both Will and Jack look at him, “What?”

“I was in the area and I saw your lights were still on.”

Will's excuse for showing up at Hannibal's office past seven at night is a poor one, but Hannibal graciously steps back from the door to allow his unexpected visitor inside regardless.

Bringing a soft wave of scent with him.

Although Hannibal is 'only' a beta, his sense of smell far exceeds almost everyone he has ever met, and, what biology has gifted him, Hannibal himself has honed. (Hyperosmia has its uses, but it has its drawbacks as well; after appointments with some of the more *pungent* of his alpha and omega patients (and occasionally a beta or two who has been overeager with their perfume), Hannibal is obliged to go around his office and remove their lingering odours with scent-deadening wipes and sprays. The rigorous cleaning is, of course, of comfort to any patients who follow the more odorous ones before, a neutral environment awaiting everyone who steps through Hannibal's door, for even an average beta can pick up, however subliminally, the lingering scent of an alpha or omega's obvious anger or distress.)

Whilst he has only known Will but a few scant weeks, that is *usually* enough time for Hannibal to have established an olfactory overview of someone. To have factored in the natural changes to one's scent variables such as one's health, regular bodily cycles, emotions, diet and wider environment can cause so that Hannibal has a baseline to reference with all his acquaintances and can smell at once when someone is deviating from their norm. Even the most minute of changes in the people Hannibal keeps closest around him can cause major differences to how he conducts his own affairs.

Of course, even with something as fundamental as scent, Will Graham - fascinatingly, frustratingly - defies categorisation, evading simple summation. Will's scent has varied wildly in all the time Hannibal has known him - along with his emotions. And the environment around him. His diet. And his trust in Hannibal.

The base elements are easily seized upon, yes - ozone, smoke, cardamom, pines -, and the hormones that denote Will as an omega. The smell of dog fur, and always at least the ghost of Will's dreadful cologne - something cheap and clearly aimed at betas, far too heavy on the citrus and sickly-sweet spices to pair well with Will's more elusive natural scent. But beyond that? Hannibal has to *dig* for any deeper understanding of the man.

Unlike with everyone else he knows, Hannibal would not dare to announce in anything more than generalities that Will always smells *this* way when happy, when aroused, or *that* way when angry, when afraid. Hannibal has no true baseline to reference (*yet*) when it comes to Will, and so must leap from moment to moment in his interactions with the omega as a man hopping from drifting log to drifting log to cross a river, at the mercy of the currents as he discovers them.

This evening, Will brings the scent of the outdoors in with him like a portent: the city breeze, the sweet smell of clear freshwater, damp earth, and decaying leaves. The air promises rain overnight, beads of atmosphere clinging to the threads of Will's jacket, in the curls of his hair.

The scent of him beneath that is… complex.

“I often stay late here,” Hannibal says, catching just a wisp of all these scents as Will moves past him and trying, in vain, to hold their transience for just a moment longer in his lungs, against the palate at the roof of his mouth. “Finishing paperwork.”

A perfectly good reason for Hannibal to frequently be out of his own house later at night.

Hannibal had just put his blue jacket back on less than ten minutes before Will’s arrival, preparing to head home and begin dinner. He has been soaking sweetbreads in cold water for two days now in preparation for tonight’s meal: a comfort dish made from the sliced roast rump of a particularly argumentative veal, served on a bed of wilted spinach with caramelised sweetbreads, sautéed potatoes and artichokes, all drizzled with a sweet cherry tomato compôte. Perfect for a cool autumn evening such as tonight.

And yet not even half as enticing as Will's unexpected presence.

“Surprisingly little paperwork on my end,” Will says rather enigmatically, already striding across the room. He turns on his heel before the chaise lounge, the apologetic meekness he had shown Hannibal at the door - self-conscious about encroaching into Hannibal’s space and time - already shifting into something like a challenge. Shoulders back. Chin raised. “I’m on mandatory leave again.”

“Another traumatic encounter?” Hannibal asks mildly, curiosity already drawing him back across the office to where Will has situated himself, fitting his feet to where Will’s had stepped on the floor.

“It was in the news yesterday.”

“Ah.”

Hannibal wonders, for a moment, if Will would allow him to pretend ignorance of common knowledge - especially after Hannibal has already confessed to being a reader of the likes of *Tattlecrime -,* but ultimately decides that the prevarication would only delay his hearing of what is likely to be the most engaging story he has heard all day. (Not that that would be hard; prior to Will’s arrival, the highlight of Hannibal’s day had been a discussion with his two o’ clock appointment on the care and upkeep of *nishikigoi* - ornamental koi. His patient - an omega woman from a rich background and of independent means, still classically beautiful even as she ages gracefully into late middle age - is divorcing her husband after discovering his affair with their much younger gardener, and her chief preoccupation is who will gain custody of their small mixed school of twenty year-old *kumonryu* and cream *ogon* koi, which she adores.

Hannibal has seen pictures of the fish. And of the much less impressive husband, who has threatened to cook and feed the koi to Baltimore’s seagulls if his wife proceeds with the divorce.

Hannibal’s patient has expressed the idea that she may carve up and feed her husband to the koi first, should he try it.)

Hannibal had, indeed, read *Tattlecrime*'s latest update in the small gap between his last two evening appointments the day before. "The FBI's troublesome gardener, I assume?" Will nods, so Hannibal adds carefully, curiously, "I do not recall any mention of your name."

"The details were kept from the press," Will says.

Hannibal tilts his head inquiringly - and so, to his delight, unfolds a tale.

Will paces, gesturing, as he talks, describing his trip to the hospital yesterday morning: Abigail missing from her bed, the niggling sense of something being wrong. The determined Eldon Stammets, made gullible by his desperation for companionship and understanding. Abigail abandoned in the hospital hallway, country music on the radio, and the neat row of forest graves.

Will Graham, with a shovel, in the garden.

According to the news and as far as Will himself knows, Gretchen Speck is still in the ICU. She has yet to regain consciousness, but her prognosis is encouraging.

"Then truly," Hannibal says, after expressing his pleasure at Will's own safety after his ordeal, "Ms. Speck is a one the Germans would describe as *eine Glückspilz*." Will glances at him questioningly, so he translates: "A lucky person."

Sensing a further elaboration Hannibal is still hanging onto, Will's look turns shrewd, flicking - for a moment - to the dangerous directness of Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal rewards him with clarification. "Literally translated, it means *lucky mushroom.*"

Will's laugh is startled out of him before he can think to look reproachful. By the time he manages to summon up an expression anything remotely like castigation, the damage has already been done: censure for black humour had only been Will's afterthought, and they both know it.

Will glances away again, pink just touching his cheeks. "You often take refuge in audacity."

"Few - seldom - trouble me there."

Will makes a noise of acknowledgement in the back of his throat and begins pacing anew. His travails have taken a good distance around the office - around the chaise lounge, towards the ladder leading up to the mezzanine, and to the other side of Hannibal's desk.

Hannibal has followed him with some interest so far, his pursuit slow enough, subtle enough, that Will's omega instincts don't seem to have yet been triggered by the chase. Will remains calm even as Hannibal leans forward on his desk - mentally occupied elsewhere, if Hannibal must guess, Will's shoulders and expression both sloping down into something pensive.

And then:

"Do you still consider me fit for the field?"

Hannibal considers the question - and Will. This close, the omega still smells of the outdoors, but there is something both sharp and sweet lingering underneath the rain and pines. “May I ask what prompts your question?”

Will mouth twists down sharply. “I broke a man’s legs with a shovel.” Disdainful at Hannibal, for asking something Will perceives to be obvious.

That *most* would perceive to be obvious, hence Will being placed on mandatory leave for his mental and emotional well-being.

Hannibal re-evaluates his options, and shifts track to something more socially-approvable. The long way around it is. “You neutralised an armed and dangerous opponent with the tools you had to hand.”

“I didn’t -” Will’s words abort themselves, but their life is given to his hands instead, his fingers lifted restlessly to his hair in a hopeless attempt to tame his curls. Dark twisted around the pale, blooms amidst the briars.

Lovely.

He confesses, hushed, fingers tugging: “In the hospital, I wanted to hurt him. He was going to hurt Abigail.”

Hannibal very much wants to hold him, and has to pause for a moment to examine that impulse within himself. “...And it was important to you, that you protected Abigail?”

Will takes his hands from his hair before Hannibal can betray himself and remove them for him, aiming a scathing look vaguely in Hannibal’s direction. “What do *you* think?”

“I wouldn’t dare to presume understanding of the inner workings of either your mind or heart,” says Hannibal.

Will snorts, but allows himself to take support from his surroundings, leaning forwards on a folded arm against the nearest pillar buttressing the mezzanine. “It feels like I have the ghost of Garret Jacob Hobbs shadowing my footsteps, as the last remains of an echo in my head. I *saw* him,” Will admits, almost sagging, “in the photographs of Stammets’ first garden, lying there... in someone else's grave.”

Will’s mind is quicker to make associations than most. Hannibal tilts his head, wondering at this one. “Did you tell anyone else what you saw?”

“No.”

“It's stress,” says Hannibal. “Not worth reporting. The mechanism that distinguishes conscious perceptions from internal perceptions misfired. You displaced the victim of another killer’s crime with what could arguably be considered your victim.”

Something tenses in Will’s spine. “I don't consider Hobbs my victim.” Measured. Quiet.

“What do you consider him?” Hannibal asks, genuinely interested.

Will shrugs at him and turns away from the pillar. “Dead.”

Hannibal grants Will the brief moment of privacy evasion has given him, taking a seat on his desk with his back to the omega. “And when you hit Eldon Stammets with a shovel… who was it that you saw then?”

“I didn’t see Hobbs.”

“Then it’s not Hobbs’ ghost that’s haunting you, is it?” Hannibal asks the room, an inquiry in the tones of a gentle and inexorable teacher. “It’s the inevitability of there being a man so bad that killing him felt good.”

Behind him, he hears Will’s breath catch.

Just as Hannibal cannot see Will’s face in this moment, Will cannot see Hannibal’s. Therefore Hannibal has no qualms in allowing his eyes to slip shut and his lips to part, savouring the scent of Will’s memories. Smoke amidst the pines, the scent of some sweetness emerging from the chimney of a hunter’s cabin half-forgotten in some winter woods.

“Killing Hobbs felt just,” Will murmurs.

Justice sings in tenor behind Hannibal’s eyes, *dolce e espressivo.* The sublime strains of the *Introït et Kyrie* from Fauré’s *Messe de Requiem* drift into the vast atrium given to Will within Hannibal’s Mind Palace, voices sweetly soaring even as they plead, *Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison, eleison, eleison.*

“Which is why my lights called to you this evening,” Hannibal says, opening his eyes to his office once more, the room touched anew with light. “To talk. To prove that sprig of zest you feel is from saving Abigail, not from killing her dad.”

“I didn’t feel a sprig of zest when I hit Eldon Stammets,” Will snaps at him.

“You didn’t kill Eldon Stammets.”

“I thought about it,” Will says, something a little jerky in his steps as he moves around the desk again, passing in front of Hannibal. His feelings spill out of him like his bones aren’t big enough to hold them all, spice and motion, endless unsnareable eddies and gusts. “I thought about hitting him in the head with the shovel, denting his skull. I knew when I hit him in the legs that he’d fall.”

“If your intention was to kill him,” Hannibal soothes and rationalises, “it’s because you understand why he did the things he did. It’s beautiful in its own way.”

Will turns back to look at him, and his eyes contain a storm.

Hannibal holds his gaze as long as Will will bear it. “Giving voice to the unmentionable.”

When Will glances away again, the connection snaps - and with it some of the strings that seem to have been holding Will upright. The omega fumbles for a moment, searching behind him with a hand, and finds one of Hannibal’s leather seats.

He sinks. “I should have stuck to fixing boat motors in Louisiana.”

Hannibal stores that statement away to turn over another time. “A boat engine is a machine. A predictable problem, easy to solve. You fail, there’s a paddle. Where was your paddle with Hobbs?”

“You’re the one waving a psych eval at me, despite all the trouble it could bring us,” says Will. “*You’re* supposed to be my paddle.”

“I could be,” Hannibal offers, rising from the desk so he can take the seat opposite Will. He leans in close as Will hunches over, building a small shared space between them for secrets. “It wasn’t the act of killing Hobbs that got you down, was it? Did you really feel so bad because killing him felt so good?”

He may be seated already, but Will is still visibly sinking. Hands pressed together in front of him, to hide the way his fingers tremble, his wrists shake.

“I liked killing Hobbs,” he admits, and his eyes seek out Hannibal’s again with their tempest, desperate not to find rejection.

Hannibal gives him none. “Killing must feel good to God, too. He does it all the time, and are we not created in his image?”

“Depends on who you ask.”

“God’s terrific. He dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshippers last Wednesday night in Texas, while they sang a hymn.”

Will’s mouth twists unsurely, and the blue of his gaze wavers, tempered with omega gold, misted with grey. “Did God feel good about that?”

“He felt powerful,” Hannibal assures him, for how could a deity capable of such acts not?

Will studies Hannibal’s face, his attention skipping across the infinitesimal tics of Hannibal’s expression like a pebble skimmed across the surface of a lake.

Hannibal takes care that the surface of his waters is smooth for the endeavour, beckoning, with the placidity, for the omega to linger on his shore.

“...Power’s a thing for you, isn’t it?” Will eventually surmises, leaning back into his seat. Setting light to that piece of divinity in his soul. “Control. Over yourself, over your surroundings.”

Tired of skipping small and ineffectual pebbles, it seems Will has moved on to throwing boulders instead. He is the type, Hannibal observes, to lash out in those moments he feels weak or attacked. An eye for an eye, blood balanced by blood.

“It must bother you,” Will says, “that I evaded your control. The thought that I only slept with you to ethically compromise you should you later try to analyse me.”

Hannibal mimics him by sitting upright, though he casts Will a look of reproof. “Come now, Will. You may make all the assumptions you desire about potential injuries to my ego, but please do neither of us the disservice of claiming your schemes were the *only* reason we went to bed.”

There had been schemes on both their sides, though none would have come to fruition had Will and Hannibal not found each other mutually attractive, mutually engaging.

After Will’s plans had been revealed, Hannibal had only found the omega even *more* interesting. A worthy adversary, after all, is much more difficult to find than a beautiful lover.

So called out, Will has the grace to blush. “My reasons are my own. Your motivations in all this, on the other hand…”

“Most have the measure of a man before they go to bed with him.”

Will turns his head away from Hannibal, showing off the lovely line of his neck. The unmarked skin above the collar of his shirt, with the promise of his scent glands below.

Were any of the many other, primarily high-society, omegas of Hannibal’s acquaintance to do such a thing, Hannibal would describe them as coquettish - but Will accompanies his move with a brief and indignant rolling noise in the back of his throat, just short of a threatening *trill.* An omega warning of old.

“I’m usually pretty good at measuring, Dr. Lecter, but *you* seem to defy the conventional yardstick.”

Hannibal dips his head in acknowledgement, knowing Will can see the nod from the corner of his eye; this is not something Hannibal will ever deny.

“Let me be blunt,” says Will, and spreads his hands so that each may grasp an arm of his chair. Claws pricking at the leather. “Why are you willing to help me with a psych eval? Despite the risk to our careers?”

Will can build a world on nought but a few suggestions. Sharp in every meaning of the word, he finds the keystones, cutting to the heart of things and building outwards from there.

“As you wish,” Hannibal allows, willing to trade a few belated truths for Will’s earlier vulnerabilities, “let us be blunt.”

Most people do not keep reaching out unless, at least once, they have been given evidence that someone will reach *back.*

“I am willing to help you because I find the risk to be minimal,” says Hannibal, “and you to be far too fascinating an individual to be constrained by the inadequacies of others.” He considers for a moment, before adding, “We have not known each other long, but I like you, Will. And I believe you are capable of great things.”

I like you, Will. Hannibal watches the words get stuck in Will’s throat.

Will swallows around them eventually, head half-shaking like a puppy with water in its ears, like the sentiment refuses to stay down. “You make it sound- sound so altruistic, but… it’s a selfish desire for entertainment.”

“Can’t it be both?” Hannibal asks. “I can derive pleasure from the act of helping others, whilst, at the same time, enjoy watching what those I have helped achieve.”

Will purses his lips, and doesn’t reply.

Hannibal will not allow his silence, not now, even if the only way to draw out his companion’s eloquence is to somehow pluck it physically from Will’s skull.

“And you, Will?” Hannibal prompts. “Why would *you* be willing to accept a psychological evaluation from me, despite the risk to our careers?”

Apparently disgruntled at being prodded whilst still sifting through his thoughts, Will’s answer is almost petulant. “I want- I want to protect Abigail. And others like Abigail. And I believe that the best place to do that would be out in the field.”

“A noble wish,” Hannibal says magnanimously. “Should I give you a referral?”

Will shakes his head again, and, inwardly, Hannibal smiles in triumph.

In his Mind Palace, Fauré’s choirs still signal the opening of their rites: *ad te omnis caro veniet.*

Kyrie eleison.

“Then would you say, Special Agent Graham, based upon our understanding of one another, that you are content for me to perform your psychological evaluation?”

“Based upon our understanding of one another…” Will lifts his gaze from where it has drifted to the pattern in the carpet, his beautiful, bewitching mind still visibly turning, turning, over and over again, “as content as I’m ever going to be.”

Hannibal smiles at him encouragingly. *Good boy.* “I’ll have to type you up a new one tonight, to cover some of your latest exploits. But I see no impediment to your return to active fieldwork.”

He stretches forward in his seat, offering out his hand to the man in the other chair.

“To new beginnings, Will.”

Will regards Hannibal’s outstretched hand for a long, quiet moment without movement - before slowly, carefully, reaching out with his own hand to meet Hannibal in the middle. His grasp is equal to Hannibal’s, and firm.

“To new beginnings.”

Chapter End Notes

Confit: (from French *confire*, 'to preserve') a confit is any type of food that is cooked slowly over a long period of time as a method of preservation.

Some thought went into whether Will would call Jack or Beverly in the hospital, but I figured, at this point in their acquaintanceship, Will and Jack don't actually have each other's numbers yet. Jack certainly doesn't have Will's in *Amuse-Bouche*, as he has to yell for somebody else to get him Will on the line to warn him about Abigail.

Hannibal's dinner: roast rump of rosé veal with caramelised sweetbreads, sauté potatoes, artichokes and tomatoes. You can assume that Hannibal's take on this dish is not ethically, legally, or technically rosé, nor is it *veal*.

The *Introït et Kyrie* from Fauré's *Requiem*. Some of the most tender moments between Hannibal and Will are scored with pieces of Fauré's *Messe de Requiem* in the show (especially when Hannibal is thinking about Will), so you're going to see more references to his work. Gentler in tone than other requiems, Faure's *Requiem* has been called 'a lullaby of death.'

And so we're (finally!) finished with *Amuse-Bouche*. Congratulations to that one cop who didn't die this chapter because Freddie Lounds didn't write an article about Will Graham, because Will Graham never went to Stammets' (canon) garden in the woods. On the other hand, condolences to Gretchen Speck, who got a whole heap more trauma than she did in the show, because she was in Stammets' clutches for longer.
Now, the fun can really start.

friandises

Chapter Summary

Will navigates a cold case, courting attempts, and Halloween candy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will returns to work a few days later and is immediately deluged with things to do: papers to mark, emails to answer, and classes to rearrange. A few of his colleagues have requested his major assistance in crafting a new multiple homicide scenario for the recruits in Hogan's Alley, with the addendum of 'we want to make it mean, and we want to make it *weird.*' The subsequent passionate inter-departmental email exchange that results from the preliminary spitballing of ideas clogs up the first two pages of Will's inbox and leads to another professor laughingly tossing a wadded-up paper napkin at Will in the cafeteria to get Will's attention from two tables over.

"Not *that* weird, Graham!"

After a summary amount of processing, the bureau returns Will's gun to him and reimburses him for the cost of a new cell phone when he hands them the receipt. (His old one had apparently been shattered when no less than *three* people had stepped on it in the hospital, and then they had run over the last remaining pieces of the poor thing with Abigail's gurney when they'd wheeled her back to her ward.)

Unharmed by Stammets' kidnapping attempt, Abigail has now, much to Will and Alana's relief, been moved to the relative safety of Port Haven.

Will's students have, for the most part, forgiven him for missing their classes - largely because whispers of Will's involvement in the capture and arrest of Eldon Stammets are going around and they're impressed again. It's a secret in the Academy so, naturally, everybody knows about it. Thankfully, *because* no-one is supposed to know about it, Will doesn't have to deal with his students standing up and applauding him again, but *someone* sneaks a little pumpkin onto his desk between classes on his second day back. An 'apple' for teacher.

The pumpkin is a little white Baby Boo, as far as Will can tell, with Will's solemn cartoon likeness kindly, if not terribly skilfully, drawn on it with several colours of marker. The artist has gone a little wild with the length of Will's eyelashes in Will's opinion, but the flop of Will's curls and the shape of his glasses make it an otherwise fairly faithful depiction.

Will leaves the pumpkin unacknowledged - but *does* give it a seat of honour on the side of his desk during his lectures (much to the quiet amusement of his students).

With the end of October imminent, the spirit of Halloween has descended upon Quantico with a grisly vengeance (rather fitting, since the windowless, 70s block architecture is so reminiscent of a tomb). Dangling skeletons and orange and black bunting en-masse is considered a little *too* passé for the hallowed halls of the FBI, but a few Jack o' Lantern stickers manage to sneak their way in regardless; the cafeteria manages to festoon itself with fake cobwebs, and a few luminescent candy bowls have been set out here and there. Occasionally with actual candy in them.

Will snags himself some off-brand chocolate peanut butter cups to munch on throughout the day - only to get caught with one hanging out of his mouth by Hannibal Lecter as Will is packing up after one of his lectures for lunch.

Lecter manages to condense so much judgemental *distaste* for the peanut butter cup melting onto Will's lips in one look, he might as well package up the solid product and sell it as a flavour of its own.

Will very pointedly shoves the rest of the candy into the hollow of his cheek before acknowledging the other man. "Dr. Lecter."

"Is that your lunch?" asks Lecter, continuing to radiate the disapproval of *genteel* schoolmarms everywhere: *don't talk with your mouth full*.

"I have three more in my bag," says Will, who had been planning to supplement the peanut butter cups with a hot sandwich from the cafeteria but now feels almost committed to seeing if he can survive the rest of the working day fuelled only with coffee, filched Halloween candy, and spite. "Along with two giant sour gummy worms and a packet of candy corn."

"Truly," Lecter says dryly, "a balanced meal."

Will stuffs some more papers into his bag, trying not to crush them in his haste. "It comes in five to six different colours and, in some circles of thought, candy corn has been hypothesised as a vegetable."

Lecter's general expression suggests that the circles of thought Will is making reference to may not, in fact, be circles, but actually downward spirals into the worst kinds of depravity known to man.

From his own bag, the doctor withdraws a small thing wrapped in brown paper, holding it out to Will. "May I offer you something to complement - or better yet, replace - your candy hoard?"

Will swallows the melted remains of the candy in his mouth and takes the package a little warily with both hands, unwrapping it just enough to peer at its lovingly-swaddled contents.

Under the layers of two paper napkins and a little plastic bag sits one incredibly expensive-looking sandwich, miraculously unsquashed from its journey and bursting with filling. Meat, onions, and… some kind of topping.

“Barbecued ox heart in a white roll, garnished with toasted onions and my home-made salsa verde,” says Lecter - who is looking rather pleased with himself, for all his irises will never bleed that telling alpha ‘provider’ red.

“Are these anchovies?” Will asks, still looking at the sandwich.

“In the salsa verde, yes. Along with herbs, capers, mustard and vinegar. Do you not like anchovies?”

“Anchovies are fine,” says Will, whose prime experience with anchovies - after using them as fish bait - is picking the overly-rubbery ones off of pizzas other people have ordered.

He wraps up the sandwich again, and asks Lecter, somewhat suspiciously, “You drove all the way to Quantico just to bring me lunch?”

“And to deliver your psychological evaluation to concerned parties.”

Will frowns. “Email is a thing. As is snail mail.”

“The hard copy is always preferred for the FBI’s files,” Lecter replies evenly, “and I wanted to be sure your evaluation didn’t get lost in the post. And, since I was going to be here…”

“Lunch,” says Will, and sighs inwardly down at his donated sandwich. Lunch, and not a verbal or psychological attack. A thoughtful gesture following a thoughtful gesture. From Hannibal Lecter. Again. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure, Will. I thought you might appreciate knowing that the paperwork is being filed on a full stomach. In addition -” Lecter reaches into his breast pocket and withdraws an expensive-looking business card between two fingers, holding it out to Will. “I was informed you have a new phone?”

“Uh, yes,” Will says, taking the card automatically despite the fact he doesn’t have a new *number.* He’s just about to explain that when the focus of Lecter’s eyes drifts past him - and lands on Baby Boo Graham still sitting on Will’s desk. Of course.

Lecter’s lips twitch. “Does that pumpkin have your face on it?”

“No,” Will lies, and shifts as smoothly as he can to stand between Lecter and the desk.

Blocking Lecter's line of sight. Because grown adults are *so* frequently known for their issues with object permanence.

Thankfully, Lecter doesn’t call Will out on Will’s - terrible - lie, and, after he leaves, Will finishes packing his bag (pumpkin included) and takes his sandwich out to eat in the sunshine.

The ox heart is offensively delicious - because what normal person goes to all the effort of obtaining, then meticulously trimming and cooking an *ox heart* just to stick it in a sandwich? -, pink and tender between Will’s teeth and flavoured fantastically with smoke. The salsa verde (anchovies and all) slathered over the meat isn’t sleeping on the job either, providing a

good sharp kick with every bite. Will is left licking his fingers clean at the end of his meal, and finds himself fully prepared - after he stubbornly eats one of his giant gummy worms, just to prove a point to the universe - to walk back into the Academy building and be immediately confronted by Jack Crawford.

“So,” says Jack, *de trop,* falling into step with Will on the way back to his classroom, “Lecter gave you the ‘all clear’?”

No *Hello, Will. It’s good to see you back at work, Will. I hope your mandatory leave was good for your health?*

“Seems so,” Will says neutrally, which is a better retort than the passive-aggressive *and a good afternoon to you as well, Jack* burning on the tip on his tongue.

Jack smiles a little smugly, his scent heavy with alpha victory. “Therapy might work on you after all.”

“Therapy is an acquired taste which I have yet to acquire.” Will tightens his fingers on the strap of his bag over his shoulder, sternly reminding himself that he does *not* want to try and prove Jack wrong here and have the alpha looking into the details surrounding Will’s psych eval. “But, uh, it served your purpose. I'm allowed back in the field.”

Jack’s eyes bore into the side of Will’s head, picking up on Will’s dismissal of the eval all the same and wary because of it. “Field’s quiet at the moment, so I figured I’d ask you to look at some of our older cases. Get you acclimated again.”

“Older?”

“Cold.”

They come to a halt in the corridor, students giving them both a wide berth as they go by.

“Jack,” Will protests, finally noting the case file in Jack’s hands. It is a very *thick* case file. “You know I do better on-scene.”

“You did pretty good just with Stammets’ file,” Jack says stolidly. When Will tries to argue, he goes on, “You think I don’t know you were the one who gave us the pharmaceutical lead? My team’s good, but I can hear it when you put your words in their mouths.”

Will pushes his tongue hard against the back of his teeth, trying to not let something inflammatory slip out. No-one needs to see a professor and the head of the BAU yelling in the hallway.

Jack holds the case file out to him. “I’m not asking you to perform miracles, Will. Just give us your thoughts. A profile, if you can manage one.”

“These thoughts gonna get followed up on?” Will asks, chary of being handed some petty punishment busywork that will do nothing except accumulate more dust in some FBI storeroom.

“If you think they’re worth following, I’ll make sure of it,” Jack assures him.

Will takes the damn case file.

He doesn’t get - or make - a chance to look at it until later - much later -, pulling it out of his work bag by accident at home when he’d just meant to reach in for his little pumpkin self. For the rest of the evening thereafter, through walking the dogs, feeding the dogs, and a microwave lasagne, the file sits on the side-table where Will had dumped it, glaring at Will out of the corner of his eye.

With the exception of his students’ essays and reports, which are far too frequent and numerous for Will to read and mark them *all* in his airless little office every time, Will deliberately tries to avoid bringing work home with him. It taints his space, physically and mentally, a bleed-out effect built upon associations.

Wolf Trap is Will’s escape from the carnage of the FBI. The vast fields of nature around his home are as deliberately removed from the horrors people inflict upon each other as Will can make them whilst still allowing for a regular work-commute. An FBI case file sitting out in the open in the heart of Will’s home is an imposition, an intrusion on the peace Will has worked so hard to build for himself - and, what is worse, *Will* is the one who had carried it across his threshold and brought it out of his bag into the light.

Accidents caused by carelessness aren’t free of blame.

Will pours himself two fingers of Jim Beam, and opens the file. He can’t *not;* he’s reminded himself that the file exists now, and that knowledge will haunt him until he’s acknowledged its ghost.

Inside the file sits a large assortment of paperwork detailing the violent genital and glandular mutilation of twenty-four alpha males - twenty-two adults and two minors - and one adult beta male, and the resulting death of seventeen of them. The attacks had taken place four years ago, across the state lines of Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia, with a couple in D.C.

Assaulted both on the streets and in the supposed sanctity of their own homes, all of the victims had been rendered unconscious with a blow to the head before mutilation. The earliest victims, eight alphas, had all been castrated - that is, orchiectomised, their testes removed -, and the following seventeen men fully emasculated, their penises removed as well. All of the men had had their scent glands inexpertly (and not wholly) cut out of their necks, whilst ten (nine of the alphas and the beta) had also suffered the removal of the more minor scent glands in their wrists and thighs. The beta had been the final victim.

Death - in the instances where it had occurred - had unsurprisingly been due to both extreme blood loss and shock, with a side of blunt force trauma to the head.

The photographs of the scenes are lurid, terrible things, full of dribbles and pools of red and brown, drying blood. The bodies of the dead victims, clothes still half-yanked off, their faces still twisted in pain.

Eight men had lived, and their photos show the crime scene has travelled with them to the hospital and beyond. In the awful bleeding wounds and bruises on their bodies, each summarily recorded for the file. In the loss, grief, confusion and anger in their eyes.

In the space Will can see *behind* their eyes in the photographs: the void, howling.

Will's hand shakes, and he has to set down his empty whiskey glass before he drops it.

It slams down a little too hard to the tabletop regardless; nothing shatters, but the force of the motion sends reports and photographs flying around it. Some flutter to the floor, and Will has to crouch down and pick them up again before the dogs can tread all over them.

As he bends, something small, pale and rectangular slips out of Will's shirt pocket and drifts down to join the mess on the floor. Dr. Lecter's business card. Lecter's full name, enough post-nominal letters to create a new alphabet, and occupation neatly printed alongside his office email, phone number and address.

Private has been penned on the reverse in a rather elegant hand, along with a cell phone number.

Private.

Will contemplates the word, and the number written alongside it, for a few long moments, idly nudging Buster away from him when the little dog comes to investigate a) what Will is still doing crouched on the floor, and b) whether what Will is holding is something he can eat.

Buster trots off self-importantly to relay the knowledge he has gained to the rest of the pack (Will is doing human things of no interest to canines and there is no food). Will gathers up the papers still on the floor and scrapes them - and everything else related to them still on the table - in whatever order they fall in back in their file, taking the whole back to his bag and shoving it unceremoniously in there.

Fuck *that.*

It's late, but it's not *unsociably* late, so Will sees no problem in grabbing his cell and shooting the esteemed Dr. Lecter a text message to his private number. Since Lecter had seen fit to provide Will with it.

> The sandwich was delicious, thank you again. Really went well w my gummy worms.

Five minutes go by. Will pours himself another finger of whiskey, taking it over to his favourite armchair to sip whilst petting Winston, who immediately pads over to lay his furry head in Will's lap.

Will's phone buzzes: Lecter's reply.

>> I have heard - and endorse - the pairing of one's drink to one's meal, but I believe this may be the first time someone has given one of my dishes a complimentary recommendation of mass-produced candy.

And again.

>> Good evening, Will.

A stickler for manners. Will's lips quirk, and he has to press the rim of his glass hard against them to keep down his smile. He texts back:

> Perhaps you should look into that.

> Think of all the niche markets you could conquer.

Lecter's response is swift, considering its length.

>> A brief envisioning of the consumer demographics those niche markets might contain is a suitable enough deterrent for that sort of career change, even were I not to have glanced at the ingredients lists of some of the candy you'd have me use.

Will snorts, and drains his glass.

> That's a very fancy way of saying you don't want to listen to a bunch of elitist preppy meatismurder vegan moms who think enumbers and vaccines will give their babies autism and adhd

>> Combined with a few of the individuals I met during my time as a practising MD who did not understand the necessity of eating a piece of fruit upon occasion - no, I really do not.

> Scurvy?

>> Scurvy.

> So you DON'T want to give me an alcohol pairing for my chocolate peanut butter cups then?

The silence after that text is long enough Will assumes Lecter must have gotten fed-up with him and abandoned the conversation. He's just about to get up and take the dogs for one more walk before bed when his phone buzzes again.

>> Try a barrel-aged stout beer. The richness of its flavours should bring out the butter-chocolate flavour of your candy. Or a cabernet sauvignon, if you'd prefer wine.

And again.

>> And Will, please.

And *again.*

>> At least don't pair it with a knock-off brand.

Will laughs loudly and suddenly enough he startles Winston - and the other dogs, who sit up from their rest around him and begin to bark.

Late October fills the farmer's markets around Baltimore with an abundant harvest, the plenty obvious in the bright colours that linger in the mind's eye, in the sweet, ripe scents that fill the air with warmth.

That morning, Hannibal is another splash of colour amidst the wares, the tote bags over his arm already bulging with his carefully-selected purchases. The finer Maryland vendors know him by his bold sartorial choices as much as his discerning eye: a few of the stalls whose owners Hannibal regularly purchases from greet him by name, happy to keep back some of the best of their goods for an unfailingly polite regular with deep pockets and an actual appreciation for their wares. The sight of one of Hannibal's bright suits moving gracefully through the market crowds usually guarantees them a good sale that morning - and a good conversation, if the crowds aren't too busy. Hannibal is often content to linger over his shopping and discuss recipes, the harvest's prospects, the occasional deft joke dropped amidst smidgens of market gossip and advice on what to buy and not buy that week.

So close to Halloween, the price of squashes is quite high. When he stops at one stall to inspect its wares, its owner gestures Hannibal closer so she can murmur in his ear: some of her crop of winter squash is ripening a little too late for the Halloween crowds, but will be perfect for market next week. Much better than what is available *this* week, all those gaudy pumpkins - or *les citrouilles,* as she calls them in her mother tongue.

An old French expatriate, the woman has a low opinion of many of the New World gourds, especially the *citrouille véritable,* or true pumpkin, that the Americans love so much for their pumpkin carving this time of year. The *cucurbita pepo* squash is too unwieldy, according to her, too stringy, too prone to be almost flavourless when cooked.

Her *potirons,* on the other hand, are much better for a good chef, for proper French cooking. The *cucurbita maxima,* winter squash, is much sweeter than the true pumpkin, better for handling with its more elongated shape. And it makes delicious, filling soups.

When Hannibal agrees in his Parisian French and promises to come back the following week to purchase some, the stall-owner beams at him, reaching out with one wrinkled hand to pat his cheek.

"Ah, *docteur,*" she laments, weighing up the pears he has chosen to buy from her today, *"pourquoi mon fils ne peut-il pas être comme toi?"*

"*Madame,*" Hannibal assures her, smiling with a hint of teeth, *"il n'y en pas deux comme moi."*

Watermelon and cranberries are in season in Maryland and Hannibal has half a mind to purchase some. The fruits are very versatile, sweet with the last of summer, and lend

themselves well to quick juices and desserts - a helpful trait, as Hannibal has found himself inviting people to his dinner table more impulsively than usual lately, ever since Jack Crawford had first walked into his office.

Including the alpha himself the night before.

It is very much in Hannibal's interest to cultivate a feeling of friendship in Jack Crawford towards himself - and so Hannibal had invited the head of the BAU over to his home for dinner whilst dropping off Will's psychological evaluation. Politely bearing Jack's strong scent in his dining room later that night, the alpha's natural scent noticeable even over the smell of the roasted meat on their plates. Smiling at the way Jack's chest puffed from being placed at the head of Hannibal's table - without realising it gave Hannibal the opportunity to put the whole length of the table between them, and Jack the furthest away from the exits.

A watermelon and cranberry sherbet, topped with a sprig of mint and scattered berries, looks very dramatic served in a beautiful glass dish. Perhaps it might have served as a better follow-up to the loin and Cumberland sauce Hannibal had presented Crawford with, rather than the caramel-drizzled baked apples Hannibal had brought out instead.

Not that Jack would have probably cared either way; the man's tales of his, his wife's, and his mother's cooking have Hannibal grimacing even the morning after.

Thankfully, the rest of their dinner conversation had been enlightening rather than horrifying, Jack keen to pry out Hannibal's secret for the handling of Will Graham. Apparently Will's decision to go for his psychological evaluation - and thus continue working with the BAU - has been entirely accredited to Hannibal's influence, and so Jack now believes Hannibal's guidance should be sought in generally steering the unpredictable Will onto Jack's determined course. And keeping him there.

Jack is very concerned about the keeping of Will there, wary of reaching out once more to grab what he has already told himself is a sure line, only to find it fraying in his hands.

Jack has had ropes he's anchored shorn away from him before, and now holds more tightly to what he has remaining. Reassuring himself.

Unfortunately for Jack, Will Graham is a man who needs support, yes, but not to be tied down. In Hannibal's opinion, Will sorely needs friends and faith in those around him, and for those around him to have faith in him. A non-judgemental ear always ready to listen.

Hannibal intends to provide the latter. And Jack?

Jack, for all his talk, for all his concern, for all his careful clearing of the necessary paperwork… Hannibal does have to wonder how long Jack's attentiveness to the state of Will's mind will last, as long as Will Graham does exactly what Jack needs him to.

After reassuring Jack that he intends to continue offering his support to Will, Hannibal had led the conversation onto safer, lighter topics, and the meal onto dessert.

(Will's presence had lingered around the table regardless, like pale fingertips brushing over the wood out of the corner of Hannibal's eye. His figure in the flickering shadows cast by Hannibal's candles. His eyes in the glint of the flames off Hannibal's polished silverware.

His scent in the sweet mingling of smoke, pastry, apples, caramel and cinnamon-cloves, deep in Hannibal's lungs and melting on his tongue.)

After a little more hunting through the market, the fresh cranberries Hannibal finally chooses to purchase shine like jewels in the morning sunlight. One of the little fruits is dislodged from its safe space amongst its brethren when the stall-owner measures out the amount Hannibal had asked for, the berry tumbling out of its basket, off the stall and down onto the ground below, where it bounces a little way and then is summarily crushed by the passing feet of the market crowds.

So much life, colour and movement - and it only leaves a little skin behind in the dirt. A small red smear.

Cranberries bought and safely tucked away in one of his tote bags, Hannibal takes care to step over the mark on the ground as he continues on with his shopping. It wouldn't do to stain his shoes.

Will spends the next few days bothering Lecter with texts asking him to match the worst and cheapest possible Halloween candy that Will can find to various beers, wines and spirits. Lecter tolerates it in good humour, suggesting a shiraz or a cognac to go with Will's imitation M&Ms, and port or a smooth, generic mid-range whiskey for Hershey's chocolate (*'whatever,'* he texts, *'trite and *spooky* shape it has been moulded into for the season'*). Butterfingers should apparently be consumed with bock, a traditional German-style beer that is as dark and sweet as the candy, whilst candy corn can ostensibly go with pretty much any wine or a light lager (*'the dry finish should bring out the caramel flavours rather than the wax* '). Lecter recommends prosecco for Will's Sour Patch Kids and gummy worms, due to the wine's complementary tartness and fizzing bubbles - or tequila, if Will sticks his candy in a shot and downs it.

> *Have you ever made skittles vodka?* Will inquires after the tequila comment.

>> *I don't believe I have, and do I want to know?* Lecter texts back.

> *I think we had very different experiences in college.*

Skittles - even the truly terrible knock-off version Will has found to send Lecter a picture of - should be paired with a riesling, a pale ale or a light rum. And the SPOKKY GHOST CANDY imported from China -

>> Do you even know what that is? Lecter asks after Will has snapped him a pic of the horrific *blob* in clear packaging that Will has just fished out of an FBI candy bowl.

Will does not. The blob is a pale off-white streaked with grey food dye, squashed and bulging, and may be bleeding some kind of luminescent pink syrup.

He eats it. For science.

> Tastebuds say shitty marshmallow.

Lecter recommends Will wash down *'that crime against marshmallows'* with whatever alcohol is to hand, because nothing that could complement a product that bad would be safe for humans to consume.

In his 'free' (*ha*) time, Will works on Jack's cold case. Spreading out the photographs on the desk in his lecture hall between classes, the escalation of the unsub is clear. The attacks had begun with castration and the attempted removal of the major scent glands in the victims' necks (eight alphas, one dead), and, over the course of seventeen months, progressed in both scope and brutality to full emasculation with removal of the major scent glands (seven alphas, six dead), then full emasculation with the removal of major *and* minor scent glands (nine alphas and one beta, all dead).

Will doesn't use the victims' names if he can help it, refusing to let their minds, their personalities and their pain, sink into him more than they already have. Hopefully, he can help bring them justice, but he doesn't want to carry the weight of either the living victims or the dead.

(It is a relief and a horror of history, still true to Will even now: the cries of the nameless dead are more easily dispersed on the wind.)

The previous investigators on the case had proceeded along the theory that the attacks had all been premeditated murder and attempted murder, personal in nature, either alpha on alpha violence or a beta lashing out against alphas they had known (in what the reports do not describe, but heavily imply, to be Freudian *knot/penis envy.* How so many knot*heads* graduate the Academy every year and still use *Freud* in their psychoanalysis is something Will despairs over). Pointing to the personal nature of genital mutilation for their justification, with a side-note about how alphas and betas had once sliced off the penises of those they defeated in battle, particularly if those enemies were alphas. To emasculate the defeated one both physically and mentally, to remove the opportunity for the defeated one to sire children to avenge their father, and for the victorious one to be able to display their collection of knots around their den: a sign to their mates of their prowess in battle against mighty foes, of their ability to defend mate and children, hearth and home.

Personally, Will can't really see the appeal in building a nest in a den full of decomposing alpha penises. And he disagrees utterly with the opinion that the attacks in the case in front of him had been caused by an alpha or a beta who had had a personal grudge against most, if not all, of the victims.

Aside from being nearly all alphas, and two of the victims having attended the same college (with a great many years between), the victims have nothing in common with one another: all different ages, ethnicities, beliefs, shapes and sizes. From different socio-economic backgrounds, with wildly different careers (or no career at all), in varying stages of health, with completely different hobbies and habits. How could one unsub personally know them all?

Additionally, for an attack committed by an alpha, Will would expect to see greater injury inflicted upon the victims than is reflected in the reports, with the genital mutilation in particular performed whilst the majority of the victims had been conscious, rather than insensate from a blow to the head. Alphas who are violent favour prolonged attacks and tend to gloat over their violence, requiring their victims to be conscious as witnesses to their own defeat. An alpha taking another alpha's penis as a battle trophy would likely remove the penis as a passionate crowning moment of the attack *after* causing multiple other wounds and injuries, to absolutely establish dominance.

Save the beta victim, the penectomies in Will's file are largely dispassionate. The cuts inexpert, but limited for an amateur with a knife. Eight of the men - the earliest of the victims - had not had their penises removed *at all.*

Will turns back to his phone and Lecter to complain, knowing the beta doctor would find the shitty Freudian analysis as annoying as Will himself does.

Somehow, it turns into a conversation between the two of them about the Italian *castrati* of old - or *musici,* to be less derogatory. Those alpha and beta men castrated as children in the hope their voices would be strong and pure enough as adults to sing for operas, to fill the choirs of the highest churches, their voices lifted to God.

It's interesting and tangential, a perfect balm for Will's nettled sensibilities - right up until Lecter invites Will to dinner on Halloween. And offers to make rocky mountain oysters, since they're on-theme.

Will informs Lecter that he is a terrible person.

> You're a terrible person.

Lecter ignores him.

>> Perhaps a full evening of Mexican cuisine, a seasonally appropriate nod to the upcoming Día de Muertos.

>> In Mexico, our starter would be called criadillas. There are many ways to prepare and cook bull's testicles, but, for us, I believe a light flouring before frying and a simple garnish would be best.

>> To follow, calabacitas con puerco y elote: a pork stew, made with squash and corn. Served with rice and fresh tortillas. With crèmes caramel - flans - for dessert.

Will's stomach rumbles. Another feast at Lecter's table is a tempting proposition, especially with contemplations of *where* they might eat Lecter's promised dessert - but on Halloween? Will very, very rarely gets visitors on Halloween night, but he has classes to teach that day and the day after, and the road home, come evening, will be full of friends and families trick or treating, and drunken teenagers stumbling between parties and horror houses. There's an elaborate corn maze not far from Will's whose traffic is *already* disrupting his drive home.

> *That all sounds delicious, but I'll probably be too tired on halloween. Classes that day and day after, plus halloween traffic, don't mix well*

> *Sorry.*

A trip to the lab is a good distraction from awkward text chats. Complicated (and non-urgent) conversations with Beverly are easiest to do in person - as messages sent to her email seem to vanish into a void -, and Will wants to pick her brains about improving the fibre evidence for his proposed Hogan's Alley scenario.

Unfortunately, Price and Zeller are already picking her brains about the human race's chances of survival against various horror movie monster archetypes. Will arrives just as Beverly announces that, obviously, supernatural enemies such as vampires are going to pose a greater threat to humanity than, say, a pack of incestuous hillbilly cannibals, and so is treat to Price's strong refutation. Apparently the territoriality of vampires means that yes, individual cities will be lost, but the human race should ultimately survive a vampire invasion - and in fact eventually stage a successful rebellion against its vampiric overlords.

"Especially if the fanged fuckers burn up in the sun," Zeller adds, to the sound of Beverly's snort. "Incestuous hillbilly cannibal gangs, on the other hand, range widely across the country."

"I feel like there's a study in there somewhere," Price muses, looking to the ceiling lights above them as though he's already composing the opening paragraphs in his mind. He has inspiration there to look at: a small colony of black paper bats dangle from the ceiling tiles on strings. "A Comparison of the Migratory Patterns of the North American Vampire and Cannibal Populations."

"In *Media,*" Beverly stresses, sitting front-to-back on her computer chair and swinging it back and forth.

"Spoilsport," says Zeller, and pushes her chair away from him with his foot.

"Apprehend any *vampires* lately?" Beverly shoots back, alpha fangs on playful show as Zeller huffs, before she spots Will standing in the doorway. "Graham! You come down here willingly now?"

Rather than asking about the room about the alleged territoriality of vampires, Will gives the woman a long pointed look up and down.

Beverly flaps a dismissive hand at him. "Some of us work here. Pity me."

Amazingly, Beverly is more than happy to take a breather from all her hard work (apparently, waiting on a notoriously slow computer to spit out some results) and come to the break room to offer Will some advice about staging the fibre evidence that FBI trainees will be expected to gather and analyse in his hypothetical Hogan's Alley scenario.

Will fetches them both a cup of water after they've been talking for a while (the smell of the break room coffee still turns his stomach), Beverly taking the opportunity to flick through the papers containing the - detailed - proposal Will and his colleagues have put together again, her own suggestions now scribbled in the margins.

"If this goes ahead, whoever has to do set-up is gonna curse you 'til the cows come home. Getting all the DNA evidence and then spreading it across all your proposed sites is gonna be a nightmare."

"You like it then?" Will asks, taking a sip from his cup. Lukewarm. *Ugh.*

"It's evil," says Beverly. "Of *course* I like it. But, uh," she plucks out a familiar gruesome photograph from amongst the papers, twirling it at Will between two fingers, "methinks this doesn't belong here?"

It's a photograph of the dead beta from Jack's cold case. On-scene, the mutilated corpse is lit baldly by the camera's unforgiving light, floating in a coagulated sea of its own blood.

Will takes it from Beverly with a grimace. "Sorry, it must've slipped out of my other file."

Beverly's computer finally spits out the results she's been waiting for and she has to return to - actual - work. Will has a class to get to in half an hour, so he gathers up his papers again and waves goodbye to Beverly, Price, Zeller and their paper bats as he jogs past their lab.

It's not until he's packing up to head home for that day that Will looks at his phone again, lighting up the screen in the dim of his lecture hall to check the time.

One text is waiting for him, notification glaring red: Lecter, again, sent barely a few minutes after Will's last message to him.

>> Perhaps you might allow me to bring dinner to yours on the evening of November 1st instead?

Seven dogs, Will wants to remind him, stunned and still. *I have seven dogs.* Trying to imagine, for a moment, the utter incongruity of Dr. Hannibal Lecter in Will's home, fancy suits with sleek tailoring against the backdrop of Will's mismatched thrift-store furnishings. Style vs. worn-in comfort. The debonair vs. dog fur.

The thought is strange, and more than a little laughable. Not that Will laughs. It makes something like a smile twist wistfully on his lips anyway though, which is close enough.

Will can count on one hand the people who have been inside his little farmhouse beside himself, and two of them had been deliverymen. No-one has visited twice.

Does he want *Lecter* to visit twice? Will taps the edge of his phone against his lower lip and considers.

("I like you, Will.")

Despite it being an inconvenience for him should he decide to pursue Will as a case study, Lecter seems quite determined to tie the two of them together: platonically, professionally, sexually. (Romantically?) Will isn't going to lie about the same misdemeanour with the same man *twice,* so he can only assume that Lecter really *doesn't* want to publish any papers on him - or, at the very least, that Lecter places being Will's… Will's *friend* above that professional achievement in his list of priorities. Friend-with-benefits.

They had shaken hands over the promise of new beginnings, but, consummated, their relationship would put them both right back exactly where they had been before Will's psych eval: *status quo ante bellum,* except this time the power of control would be balanced between them.

Professionally, anyway. Sexually and emotionally, on the other hand...

The light of Will's phone screen burns through his closed eyelids. Spots his vision on the inside of his eyes, warm rounded shadows like fingers cupping Will's scrambling thoughts, large, strong hands wrapped around his own. Handing Will lunch, dinner, cake and coffee. Fingers laced between fine cotton bedsheets. Striking a devil's bargain between leather seats.

Will isn't blind; his earlier tactics won't work any more (like they had *ever* worked). Lecter isn't going to go away until his fascination with Will has run its course, and Will isn't sure, exactly, what he could do to speed up that process.

If he still *wants* to speed up that process.

Lecter is obviously interested in whatever Will is willing to give him, and not at all adverse to a little pushing of Will's boundaries to test their firmness. He's attracted to Will, and Will is attracted to him. And there's a decent amount of mental engagement, of genuine camaraderie, to go along with their lust.

If Will invites Lecter to his home, if the aesthetic dissonance and obvious lifestyle differences don't immediately drive the handsome doctor away and if Will doesn't firmly put a halt to events heading back in that direction…

They'll end up in bed together again.

He and Lecter will *definitely* end up in bed together again, and Will's having some trouble finding any real problems with that, provided Lecter is willing to keep things casual.

"Do I want a fuckbuddy?" Will asks his pumpkin twin, opening his eyes again.

Of course Will wants a fuckbuddy. He likes orgasms, and doesn't get anywhere near as many as he'd like provided by an attractive bedpartner without something going wrong. Will has his hands and his toys and they're *good,* but he also likes to be kissed. He likes to hold and be

held, and have another's warmth beside him, if only for an hour or two. He likes not to be lonely during his heats.

He *really* likes not developing a crick in his wrist reaching back trying to fuck himself with one of his toys.

What Will's question really means is: *do I really need the stress of having someone like* Hannibal Lecter *as a fuckbuddy?*

Plenty of omegas have beta and/or omega fuckbuddies, especially around the time of their heats.

(Plenty of omegas have beta and/or omega fuckbuddies, right up until they do what is expected of them - still, *to this day* - and 'settle down with a nice alpha.')

Will - God, Will had lost his virginity to another omega boy a little older than him, who taught him *'how omegas ought'a kiss.'* Both of them half-drunk on cheap beer they'd lifted out of their fathers' stashes, necking sloppily down by the stream one summer afternoon when neither of them had been near heat. Wandering hands sliding south into the humid spaces inside each other's shorts until the buttons and zippers had come undone, eager slick coating their legs and asses, their balls and cocks and mouths and palms.

In retrospect, the sex had been *terrible.* Over far too quickly, and utterly lacking in any decent foreplay and/or finesse. Will may as well have been a fleshlight for the way his partner had stuck his cock in him, thrusting it jerkily in and out in a manner that had been more uncomfortable than anything else, reminiscent of someone trying to clean out a bird's nest from their chimney flue.

Will had gasped his way to orgasm anyway, and thought it earth-shattering at the time. The new burst of wetness between them had had Will's partner groaning against his ear like a dying thing, his fingers leaving plum-coloured bruises on Will's hips, his stiff prick still hammering away at Will's hole as he keened about how warm and wet Will was inside, how tight, how wonderful he- *Christ!*

Most of Will's better fucks over the years have been omegas. Sadly, there haven't been many - fucks *or* omegas -, either as long-term partners or ships passing in the night.

Why *shouldn't* Will enjoy himself, with someone who wants to help with that enjoyment? He'd just be doing what omegas do the world over.

Baby Boo Graham gives Will Will's own stern look.

Baby Boo Graham is incapable of giving Will any *other* kind of look, though Will's interpretation of the little pumpkin's drawn expression may be affected by the terrible lighting and Will's own emotional biases.

Will dumps the pumpkin in his bag, and sends Lecter a text.

> I've actually had a lot of mexican lately. Would gladly accept more if that's really what you'd like to make, but chef's choice?

Lecter's answer arrives just as Will is getting into his car, Will's phone buzzing against his thigh until he fishes it out of his pocket again to read.

>> The chef would be more than happy to choose something else.

>> I take it you're amenable to my visit?

Will is amenable, and, stomach swooping with the weight of his decision, sends the other man his address. They agree for Lecter to arrive at Will's home sometime around half eight on the 1st, allowing the doctor time to get home after his last patient for the day, cook, and make the drive from Baltimore to Wolf Trap.

It'll be a very late drive home for Lecter. If he drives home that night.

If.

"Will, do you have a moment?"

If people are going to continue coming into Will's lecture hall at the end of his classes or waiting for him at this one particular spot in the corridor outside, Will is going to have to get a whole lot better at packing up quickly and sneaking out amongst his students. His fellow professor, Clive Ericson, is just one more person in a rapidly lengthening list of offenders, and Will groans inwardly at the sight of him - *especially* when the alpha perks up hopefully the moment he locks eyes on Will, doing a hurried little half-jog so he can step in front of Will in a way that unconsciously tries to, but doesn't *quite,* block off Will's immediate path to freedom.

The move is annoyingly alpha, and Ericson probably (he's not *that* kind of asshole) doesn't even realise he's doing it.

I'm not keeping *you here, but I'd like you to stay.*

"...Clive," Will says neutrally, acknowledging the other man rather than answering his question. Will actually has many moments, but he'd prefer to be spending them taking some aspirin with his lunch right now rather than making awkward conversation with a colleague who has an unreciprocated crush on him.

It's Halloween, it's a rather grey Thursday, and Will has been having A Day. Despite the fact they've got almost a week to do the latest assignment Will has handed them, his students are deeply resentful of being given any sort of work over the Halloween weekend. The resulting

low-level grumbling had haunted both of Will's lectures that morning, and Will had had to threaten to throw two of the mouthier students out of his hall in his first class.

Added to that, Will has a pounding headache, and one of the snottier superiors in charge of approving the new Hogan's Alley scenario had sent out a rather ill-informed email overnight, naysaying almost the whole of Will's proposal on the grounds that it involves a homicidal omega and *'everyone knows omegas aren't violent.'*

Someone must have linked the sexist ass to the FBI's records of omega killers before Will had had the chance to - swathes of files documenting omega killers, up to and including the quite numerous incidents of pregnant omegas and omega mothers who had literally ripped people apart with their teeth and claws when they had felt the lives of their children had been threatened -, because an amended email had been sent out some time later: '*everyone knows omegas rarely commit violent crimes.'*

That kind of generalisation, and the sweeping dismissal of Will's contributions based on such flimsy grounds, almost has *Will* ready to personally show the superior in question an omega committing a violent crime. Will even has the claws with which to do so at the moment. He'd filed his nails down only a few days ago, but already they're long enough the ragged edges bite into his palm when he makes a fist.

Ericson, standing upwind of the mild breeze currently in the hallway, fails to smell any of the tiredness Will knows his scent is putting out. The alpha's body language is too happy, too eager, to have noticed Will's dampening response to him, his cheeks a little ruddy and his scent tinged with sweat in a way that suggests he had either jogged or sped-walk to be outside Will's hall when the class let out.

Great. Just… great.

Still buoyantly flying blind in the field of Will's emotions, Ericson thrusts a very squashed-looking *something* wrapped in a 'spooky' purple paper napkin out at Will.

"Naomi," he says, still painfully earnest as he refers to another one of the FBI Academy's professors, "brought in Halloween doughnuts. I know you've been a bit too busy lately to come to the lounge between your lectures, so I thought I'd bring you one."

Still holding the shoulder-strap of his bag like a barrier between him and all the social obligations life seems so keen to throw at him from the left field, Will looks down at the proffered doughnut.

The napkin's edges are already oozing half-melted chocolate sprinkles and sludgy orange frosting.

Ericson's smile strains a little when Will makes no move to either respond to or take the doughnut from him. "Can't have you missing out after all your hard work!" he urges, tilting his head in an attempt to catch Will's eyes with his own.

Unfortunately for Ericson, Will has had more practice avoiding eye contact with other people than most other people have had experience with pinning down Will's gaze.

Will smiles blandly and keeps his gaze somewhere over Ericson's shoulder, offering the alpha in front of him the view of neither Will's exposed throat nor his submissively bent head. "Thank you," he says politely, and takes the doughnut.

The napkin immediately sticks to his hand.

Will does not *want* the doughnut, especially not when it's offered to him by the hand of an unwanted alpha suitor, but he'd look like too much of a jerk if he declined it after Ericson has clearly crossed half the building with it to make sure Will had one.

He'll be damned if he'll *eat it* in front of Ericson though, despite the pleased-proud flush of alpha red that swallows up Ericson's iris, despite the sudden swell of Ericson's content-hopeful-yearning scent of sunny, mossy woods.

There is a lot to like about Clive Ericson. A conservatively handsome alpha man in his early fifties, Ericson keeps his body in good shape with an early-morning jog five times a week, and his mind sharp by reading widely and playing puzzle games when he has time for a break. His scent is inoffensive. He gardens - he loves his garden -, his hair streaked with blond and his skin tan from all the time he spends outside. His in-depth knowledge about domestic and international gang culture is fascinating, and his attitude towards life and politics is liberal, forgiving, and progressive. He likes animals, and loves his family. He's generous with both his money and his time.

There is a lot to like about Clive Ericson and Will likes him, he does, but he isn't at all *attracted* to him, romantically or sexually. Isn't even that attached to Ericson as a friendly colleague. There's no spark between them, and Will doesn't even find himself thinking of the other man except in the context of necessary work interactions. When Ericson talks for too long, Will's mind actually starts to *tune him out.*

The Magic 8-Ball of the universe has taken one look at Ericson's dreams of a romance with Will and come back with a clear message: *my sources say no.*

"Will," says Ericson, because accepting food from an alpha is *never* just about accepting food, of course not, "I was wondering- I know it's pretty last-minute, but I was wondering if you're free tomorrow night? My sister's work is throwing a Halloween masquerade ball to raise money for our local animal shelter, and I have a spare ticket. I know you like animals, and I thought you might like to go with me?"

Somehow, Will manages to not make a face.

"...Clive," Will says, trying to be as delicate as possible. He still has to work with this man, would like to continue being a friendly acquaintance with him, but *why* won't Ericson just take the hint? "That's very kind of you -"

"If the masquerade part is an issue, it's not too fancy, and I've definitely got a mask that would fit you."

"I'm afraid I've already got plans for tomorrow night," Will says, as gently and as firmly as he can manage. Thanks to Lecter, it's not even a lie.

“Oh,” says Ericson, and wilts rather noticeably. His next smile is a bit grimacing, his short laugh self-deprecatingly awkward. “It was pretty last-minute of me to ask, huh?”

Will ignores the extended opportunity to give the other man any hope. “Could I give you a donation for the shelter?”

Ericson somewhat morosely accepts the two twenties Will hands him, pausing after he stuffs them in his pocket to reach out and squeeze Will’s forearm. “Perhaps another time. Happy Halloween, Will.”

Perhaps never.

“Happy Halloween,” Will replies, free at last to go wash his hands, dry-swallow an aspirin, and get himself some lunch.

True to the spooky spirit, the cafeteria’s fake cobwebs are especially cobwebby that day, a few rubber spiders plonked unceremoniously in the midst of the hardier webs. A googly-eyed one gawks at Will from the top of the cash register when he goes to pay for his meal, watching Will all the way across the room to his seat at an unclaimed table.

There, there is more than enough room for Will to spread out with his things, Will’s food (a bottle of water and an undercooked, baked-bean covered baked potato) standing guard over Ericson’s depressing doughnut and a few sheets from Jack’s cold case file.

Jack had asked Will for his thoughts on the case, and Will’s *thoughts* are that the previous investigators had largely been biased idiots. He’s already listed the gravest of their offences for Jack’s edification, but Will would also like to add something constructive to the case alongside his corrections.

The beta victim… upon seeing the photograph of the beta victim mixed in with Will’s Hogan’s Alley scenario, Beverly had asked: *Methinks this doesn’t belong here?*

The original investigators had agreed with her assessment. In a string of attacks against alpha males, the original investigators had decided that the final, extremely *beta* male, victim had been an accident. In their version of the tale, when the unsub had realised they’d attacked a beta rather than an alpha, the unsub had been shocked out of their own killing spree.

Even ignoring the part where Will vehemently disagrees that the unsub had intended to kill their victims (and Will’s write-up of the case does *not* ignore that part), there’s just too much different about the attack on the beta victim compared to all the alpha victims.

The beta’s is the only body - dead or living - to have *hesitation wounds*.

The beta was the most violently mutilated.

The attack on the beta, unlike *all the alphas that came before,* has *passion.*

The reports are old and the photographs are shitty: there’s too much space, too many gaps in the story, for Will to do anything like an accurate reconstruction of the unsub’s mindset in any of the attacks. Will doesn’t know why the unsub felt the need to mutilate so many men,

why they had to cut out and off the testes, knots and glands of primarily alpha men in particular.

But Will *does* know that if the unsub had known any of their victims, it had been the final one. The beta man. The unsub had felt something for that victim strongly - love, obsession -, to hesitate with a knife when they had not hesitated before, and then mutilate him so violently.

One of the earliest survivors of the attacks had managed to catch a short glimpse of their attacker before they had been knocked out with a blow to the head. The attacker's face and hair had been covered, but the alpha victim had managed to vaguely note height and build.

Will's recommendation is that agents take that description and re-investigate the people in the beta victim's life. His friends and lovers. Ex-lovers. Neighbours and colleagues. Anyone that had seen the man often enough to love him, to obsess over him.

"I see I am not the only one who frequently eats lunch in the presence of the dead."

Will looks up so sharply from his report he almost gives himself whiplash - and Jimmy Price, who had spoken to him, a heart attack. The analyst actually hops back a step from where he had been standing on the other side of Will's table and peering down at the case file's photographs, everything on the lunch tray in his hands jumping with him.

Food goes everywhere. *Coffee* goes everywhere.

"Sorry." Will winces, gathering up his paperwork so Price can set down his sopping wet tray on the table and begin mopping up some of the mess with the paper napkins he'd brought along with him.

A rather sad-looking burger appears to have survived the escapade unscathed, but Price's plate of fries is swimming in coffee.

"I think it missed my clothes, so there's no harm done. No, really," Price says to Will's disbelieving look as he sits down, depositing the sodden napkins on the edge of his tray like some soggy coffee-coloured mountain of shame. "I should know better than to disturb a man hard at work anyway."

"You've got coffee all over your fries."

"In some cuisines, that undoubtedly makes them a delicacy." Price jabs one of said fries on his fork and eats it, just to prove himself.

After a moment's consideration he puts down his fork, picks up his plate, and pours off the excess coffee into his little mound of sodden napkins - before putting the plate down again and resuming eating the fries.

"Don't you usually eat lunch in the lab's break room...?" Will asks, reminded all of a sudden about his own lunch - which sits on the table and looks at him accusingly, cold and uneaten.

“Oh, yes, but someone dropped a vial of something nasty in one of the other labs and we all got shooed away until decontamination can do their thing.”

“No-one was harmed…?”

“Oh, no,” Price says cheerfully, actually seeming to be enjoying his food. “Although it *would* be a good day for someone to get turned into some kind of superhero-slash-villain due to a science experiment gone wrong, wouldn’t it?”

“As long as they wait until tomorrow to get their costume in the discount sales, sure,” Will says distractedly, occupying himself by shoving his papers back in his bag. He’s not sure if he can watch Price eat another coffee-soaked fry. “Would you like a doughnut?”

Price looks at him inquiringly, so Will pushes the squashed napkin-wrapped doughnut Ericson had given him to the other man across the table.

Price sets down his fork to carefully unwrap the poor thing. The doughnut isn’t terrible appetising after the many hands it has passed through to arrive in Price’s; it’s been battered and half-flattened by careless fingers and thumbs, and a great deal of the neon orange frosting that *had* been decorating the top of it has now stuck to the purple tissue that should have protected it.

“You don’t want it?” Price asks - somehow without the slightest trace of sarcasm.

Will grimaces. “Alpha-gift,” he explains.

“*Ahhh,*” says Price with all the sympathetic understanding of a fellow omega, and then immediately tears off a chunk of the doughnut to pop into his mouth. Guilt-free. “Who’s the unlucky suitor?”

“Professor Ericson -”

“And you’ve given it away?” Beverly announces herself by slamming her lunch tray down beside Will’s mostly-forgotten baked potato, looking down at Will semi-reproachfully. Of course she knows Will’s feelings about Ericson, but she can’t help the little instinctive flash of hurt she must feel as an alpha watching an omega discard their gift. “He’ll’ve put his feelings in that.”

“I wasn’t encouraging him by *eating it,*” Will tells her, and Beverly huffs at him as she sits down.

“You hear that?” Zeller asks Price, hot on Beverly’s heels. (Will idly wonders what must’ve held them up in the lunch queue.) “You’re eating a man’s feelings.”

Price, already halfway through the doughnut, doesn’t look at all bothered. “You want some?”

Zeller puts his tray down beside Price’s and tears off a piece of the doughnut to chew himself. “...His feelings taste like artificial colours and preservatives.”

“You should dump him,” Price informs Will, Zeller adding a *yup* in agreement around his mouthful.

“Not dating him,” says Will, and tries not to smile at Price’s thumbs up.

Beverly turns her disappointed look on *all* of them. “Are you really gonna judge a guy’s dateability on the strength of one doughnut?”

“Weakness,” says Zeller, swallowing his mouthful with extreme prejudice and taking a seat. “On the *weakness* of one doughnut.”

“That’s far too much responsibility for a doughnut.”

Price waves one wise finger at all of them. “*First* it’s a disappointing doughnut. *Then* it’s some carefully-scented piece of clothing they want you to use for your nest - that doesn’t match any of your blankets. And *then* it’s a whole den of disappointment.”

“Wow,” says Beverly.

“Harsh, man,” says Zeller, looking at Price.

“But true,” says Price, and Will sighs and nods his head when Beverly and Zeller glance at him to see if he agrees. “If you can’t trust a suitor to pick you out something you like when it’s a relatively unimportant item, why would you trust them to pick you out something when it *does* matter? Food for your heats. A den. A collar.”

“...You hate your newest collar anyway,” Zeller says after a few moments of thought, “and didn’t your *brother* give it to you? You always complain about it after you come back from a formal do.”

“My *mother* picked it, actually.” Price sniffs. “With my brother’s input, so, yes, it is rather garish. It matches *none* of my best shirts.”

“Your best shirts aren’t up to much either, if we’re honest.”

“How dare you? I have them *tailored.*”

Will tunes out the squabbling across the table from him, making a valiant attempt to try and eat some of his baked potato and its now congealed baked beans. He needs something inside of him to stop the aspirin burning a hole through his stomach lining, even though each awful mouthful of the cold cafeteria food makes Will pine melodramatically for the ox heart sandwich Lecter had given him the other day.

Unlike Price, Will doesn’t have a collar to complain about. Will doesn’t have an omega collar of his own at all. He has no mate or family left to buy him one, and omegas don’t buy collars for themselves. Even when his father had been alive there hadn’t been the money to spare to have one made, and Henri Graham hadn’t thought enough of the Graham name to engrave it on anything for his son by hand.

Will's grandmother might have bought Will one in defiance of her son - omega collars for formal occasions are very much about *keeping up appearances,* and that had been a thing of hers -, but she had died before Will had presented as an omega.

What Will *does* have, however, is one of his mother's old collars. It's an old, tired, but still pretty thing, made of strands of blue silk woven together into a flat strip. Its large flat clasp - which distinguishes the piece as an omega collar rather than another kind of necklace - and dangling plain locket are both made of silver.

Will's mother had brought the collar to her marriage and so the clasp had been engraved with her premarital surname. But the locket… the locket had been updated since those days, containing two blurry photographs: one of Will's mother as a young woman, her face wreathed in a smile and the same dark tumble of curls she had given to Will, and the other one of Will as a baby. His hair had already been a shocking mess by that age, his hands reaching out and cheeks dimpling at whoever had been holding the camera.

Will's mother had had other collars as well. Will knows this, because he'd seen some of the ones she'd left behind before his dad had gradually sold them off over the years. Will only still has the blue silk-and-silver collar because it had been unsuitable for sale - the silver tarnished, the silk too stained with sweat.

Will had hid it a few times as a child, just in case his father had tried to sell it for a pittance just to be rid of it. The money it might've brought them wouldn't have made any difference to their finances, and it is now the only thing Will has, apart from his looks and a few blurry memories, of his mother.

When Will zones back in again, Beverly, Price and Zeller are discussing the worst travesties of the season. All the shops are full of shitty 'sexy' costumes, and every building older than three decades is suddenly haunted.

"I was called to arrest a ghost once," Will says idly, swallowing his mouthful of cold potato.

The conversation around him falls quiet, and Will looks up.

"What?"

Beverly nudges him with her elbow. "You can't say something like *that* and not give us the details." A half-hearted twirl of spaghetti slides off her fork with the motion, landing with an overly wet-sounding *splat* back on her plate.

"It's not even that much of a story."

Beverly's elbow nudges him again, a friendly prod rather than the jab it could be. (Clearly, Will is more entertaining than everyone's depressing lunches.) "'Fess up, Graham."

"It was a long time ago," Will hedges, but the expressions on his companions' faces clearly say they won't be satisfied until Will yields. He puts down his fork. "Alright, fine. It was back when I was working for the NOPD. My partner and I, we were working the mid-week night shift - and it'd been a pretty crappy night already, I remember that. Two trips to the

drunk tank already, and one to the hospital after we broke up a fight for some hothead's broken arm.

We were just coming out of the hospital when we got a head's up about a nearby cab with a runaway fare, so off we go. There's not a lot you can do about a ride-and-run except take a description and keep an eye out in case they try the same trick again, but this cab driver, he was *insistent* we do something about the young woman he'd picked up in the Quarter. Kept saying he'd never had a fare run out on him before, and this hussy wasn't going to be the first."

"Sounds like a great guy," says Beverly, dry.

"Oh yeah. We took the description he gave us and asked him which way the passenger had run after she'd left his cab, and then he came out with it. She'd just up and vanished on him from the backseat of his moving vehicle. No doors opened. *Yeah,* " Will says, catching the look on Beverly's face at his words, "that's the look my partner - Cormier - and I were giving each other when he told us this too. Because, all of sudden, we had to decide whether we had the regular case of someone running away without paying their fare on our hands, or if the cab driver was under the influence of something when he'd got behind the wheel. Or if the guy was just tired and confused. Or some mixture of all three. He *seemed* coherent enough - his eyes and speech were normal and he could walk in a straight line -, so we just had to assume he'd missed his passenger exiting the vehicle somehow."

"Or he'd actually picked up a ghost," says Price, munching on his fries again.

"Or he'd actually picked up a ghost," Will agrees, pausing to take a sip of his water. "Cormier - he had more tact than me -"

"That's a low bar," Beverly observes, so Will elbows her right back for earlier after screwing his bottle closed.

"Cormier decided to just pass over the whole ghost thing, and promised we'd keep an eye out for any young women matching the cab driver's description. But the driver just wasn't going to let the ghost thing go. He wanted us to 'eradicate the ghost problem plaguing the city.' Rather than asking if he'd meant to call the Ghostbusters rather than the cops, Cormier politely tells the guy that he's not so sure crimes committed in the otherworld fall under the NOPD's jurisdiction -" Beverly hoots with laughter, and even Zeller cracks a smile - "but we'd follow up his complaint the best we could with our less-than-supernatural ability.

The driver wasn't impressed, but we'd been there nigh on forty minutes by that point - outside, on our feet, listening to this guy bitch about a ghost we're not even sure *was* a ghost. So when he looked set to launch into another long spiel, I couldn't help myself; I cut in and asked, if we somehow caught his ghost, what we should charge her with -"

"You *didn't,*" says Beverly, already seeing where the story is going and gleefully aghast.

"I was thoroughly fed-up and I *did,*" says Will, letting his teeth show in a sheepish grin. "I asked him what he thought we should charge his ghost with - possession?"

Zeller tries to laugh and swallow his drink at the same time and ends up spluttering into his coffee. Price sympathetically pats the other man on the back until Zeller can get his breathing under control again, Beverly shaking her head into the bottled green tea drink she'd bought to go with her own meal.

"The driver looked like I'd smacked him in the face with a catfish, but he let us go after that." Will considers his own water again, and the remains of his cold baked potato - before deciding against both. His heart - and stomach - just aren't in it. "We never did find the fare-dodger, or figure out if she was a ghost or not. And I moved to homicide not long after."

"Less of the living to impress with your people skills?" Beverly teases, beginning to prod at her spaghetti again.

Will makes a face at her. "Says the one who works part-time in the *morgue.*"

"When it's not filled with toxic fumes," says Zeller, and gets the remnants of Price's coffee lifted to him in a toast.

"I find the dead to be quite good conversationalists," says Price, which is a distracting enough comment everyone else at the table has to stop what they're doing and look at him. And his fries, which he is *still* eating like they taste good. "They're very good listeners."

"This is why people look at us funny," says Zeller, half-resignation, half-complaint. "Can't you just talk to your cat?"

"I would if I could bring my cat to work," says Price.

"And put Zeller out of a job?" Beverly inquires - and gets kicked, petulantly, by someone under the table.

Chapter End Notes

Friandises: (treats/sweets/candies/confections/delicacies) There is no direct French translation (or French tradition) of the Anglo-American 'trick or treat', but, as American-style Halloween celebrations gain (a little) more popularity in France, some rough equivalents being used are *des bonbons ou un sort* (sweets or a spell), and *bêtises ou friandises* (mischiefs or sweets).
Fun fact: this is the only chapter whose title is a plural. 'Treat' just felt a little lonely by itself.

This chapter actually got cut in half because words (so many words), so revelations have been slightly postponed.

Some tasty recipes:
Barbecued ox heart sandwich (Anchovies are traditional aphrodisiacs, and this serves them with a diced heart.)

Calabacitas con puerco y elote (pork stew with squash/zucchini and corn)
Watermelon cranberry sherbet
Hannibal's candy/booze pairings come from a range of suggestions on the internet.

It is an axiom of behavioral science that vampires are territorial, while cannibals range widely across the country. - Thomas Harris, *Hannibal*

Will's ghost story is based on the - fake - fact floating around that the internet that some NOLA taxi drivers will avoid picking up fares from some areas of the city because they've picked up ghosts on more than one occasion and been stiffed on the payment when the spectres disappeared before the end of the ride.

niflette

Chapter Summary

Dinner is delicious, and Hannibal forms some opinions about Will's bed. Winston disapproves of *everything.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rather than entertaining trick or treaters, Will spends his Halloween night cleaning. Will keeps his home fairly clean and organised anyway - he has to, with seven indoor dogs, or else live in perpetual muddy squalor -, but he clears out the more questionably dated contents of his fridge, transfers his latest engine project entirely to the barn, and moves up his regular weekend vacuuming by two days to get rid of the layer of dog fur on the floor and some of the furnishings. The spare room is aired out - technically it's the master bedroom, but Will sleeps in his living room downstairs - and its bed is made with fresh linens because Will doesn't want to make presumptions about how the following night may go.

Will then promptly presumes to file his nails down (again) so that he doesn't claw Lecter's back to shreds (again) if events head in that direction - although they do, he mentally insists to himself as he digs out an emery board, need filing anyway.

Classes the following day drag the way they always seem to on a Friday, with the addition that at least half the students at the Academy - not to mention a good handful of the professors and the FBI agents also in the halls - are bleary-eyed and hungover from Halloween parties the night before. Time itself seems to have lost its motivation for moving onwards, each passing minute marked out and *felt* with each not-so-furtive glance Will's students give to the clocks on their watches, laptops and phones.

Will's own patience frays with every reminder but he forces himself to skip nothing in his lectures, reminding his students of their homework and its due date (that has *not* changed, despite the complaints). Each class is brought to a perfectly punctual close, one after another, and eventually - God, *eventually* - the day is done.

Trepidation hits on the drive home, another presence that walks beside Will as he takes the dogs out for a romp through the falling leaves in the ever-darkening evening, hoping to tire the pack out before Lecter's arrival. Will fills up their bowls when they return indoors and disappears for a quick shower whilst they're still eating, soaping himself down with scent-deadening products to hide both the smell of his anxiety and any hormonal expectations he may be unintentionally putting out.

One of the great delights of living alone is that Will can walk around his house wearing nothing but a towel around his neck and the lamplight and scandalise no-one. The *dogs* certainly don't give a damn that Will uses his living room as a bedroom, padding downstairs from the bathroom wearing only his birthday suit.

One *drawback* to this, however, is the sense of complacency it instils. Will feels unobservable in his home away from the world and frequently forgets that his living room-come-bedroom has very large windows that allow the world outside to look *in* on him - until he, wearing sweet fuck-all but his boxer shorts and one leg of a pair of comfy jeans, is very abruptly reminded by the sound of tires on the gravel road outside his house.

Fuck.

Will's head shoots up in panic to see the beams of Lecter's headlights slicing through the windows' black. Lecter's timing is *impeccable.* (Not.)

It takes a mad hop-dance for Will to get his other leg into his jeans and yank the nearest clean sweater to hand over his head before Lecter makes it up onto his porch, and he's still pulling up his fly when a knock sounds on his front door.

Will is still barefoot, and - towel abandoned on the floor - his wet hair is still dripping hopelessly down the back of his neck. It's not the casually confident look Will had been hoping to greet Lecter with, but it's the look Will is stuck with now the two of them can see each other's shadows through the screen of his door.

Time for Will to fake it 'til he makes it. Against a man even Will wouldn't like to meet over a few rounds of poker.

"Doctor," Will says as evenly as he can manage, opening his door to the night.

"Professor Graham," Lecter replies in much the same tone, though there's the amused glint of teeth in his smile as he lifts the - very - large insulated bag he's holding up in front of his chest. "Trick or treat?"

From behind Will, there is an immediate skittering stampede of paws.

Will has a scant few scant milliseconds to catch the way Lecter's eyes widen in surprise and step to the side before his dogs bowl him over - quite content to ignore their bad behaviour for a few moments and let them ambush Lecter instead. It gives Will the opportunity to swipe his used towel up from the floor and continue rubbing his hair dry, stepping back in to rescue his guest only when Harley starts pawing a little too hopefully above Lecter's kneecap, the tension in the dog's back legs suggesting he's just about to jump.

"Down," Will tells his pack firmly, clicking his tongue and pointing away until the dogs obediently move off to give the humans a little space.

"I can't recall the last time I had such an enthusiastic welcome," Lecter says, none of his amusement apparently dimmed by the canine tsunami.

Another point in his favour. It should be alarming how those are ratcheting up.

“I did warn you that I have seven,” Will reminds him dryly, closing the door once everyone is inside, “and *you* said the magic word.”

“Not *trick,* surely?” Lecter sets down his bag, elegantly peeling off the brown leather of his gloves to fold and place them in his pocket. The twist of his long fingers makes the mundane action look like living art. “Luckily, I came prepared. Would a little homemade sausage be acceptable?”

“As long as it’s not the spicy kind.”

Zoe’s digestive system objects - via repeated liquid petitions deposited in places Will’s feet don’t like to find them - to capsaicinoids.

The sausages aren’t spicy, so Will carries on with drying his hair, keeping a watchful eye on the dogs to make sure they behave themselves once the food is produced and introducing them all to Lecter as the beta throws them each, one by one, a fat chunk of sausage.

Despite Lecter’s less than feminine attributes, Max is still happy to make friends with Will’s newest guest, the tricolour border collie’s tail swishing like a metronome and almost bowling over the more timid Ellie beside him. Jack-the-dog (whose hyphenated name makes Lecter’s eyes crinkle with laughter at the corners), Will’s German Shepherd, prefers to take his portion of sausage back to his bed to devour rather than deal with the antics of his siblings around him, whilst Harley, Will’s brown-haired molosser, is content to stay put by Lecter’s ankles, all four of his paws on the ground now there’s sausage for chomping. Buster, a Jack Russell terrier, officiously guards Lecter’s other side with the airs of a dog four times his size, his canine gaze alternating beadily between Lecter above him and Zoe, Will’s tiny elderly mixed-breed mutt with a noticeable malocclusion, beside him as she chews awkwardly at her share of sausage.

Winston - Will’s newest dog, a mixed-breed retriever with gorgeously brindled gold fur - stays pointedly sitting by Will’s ankles as the rest of the pack tuck into their treats. He ignores the piece of sausage Lecter holds out to him and presses his warm body more firmly against Will’s calf when the doctor gestures in his direction.

Lecter’s head tilts - interested. “Protective?”

“Winston’s my newest,” Will explains, reaching down with one hand to rub fondly between the loyal dog’s ears, smiling at their softness. “He hasn’t had as much socialisation as the others yet, and you can’t always tell how a rescue is going to react to each new type of stranger.”

Winston hadn’t had any problems with Alana - perhaps it’s just male strangers he’s wary of?

“Time - and a hand by guided by love - heals many a wound,” says Lecter, and, after a moment’s consideration, throws the piece of sausage in his hands so it lands by Will’s feet.

It still takes Will nudging Winston with the side of his foot before the dog finally hunkers down to eat it - his eyes warily watching Lecter all the while.

Unbothered by the dog's suspicion, Lecter huffs a laugh and starts to unzip his jacket, settling in.

The jacket is a darker shade of brown leather than Lecter's gloves had been, the same colour as his boots, and both are a distracting contrast to the warm beige of Lecter's scarf - not to mention the brownish-greyish *thing* that is going on with the plaid pattern of his trousers. Adding in the gleam of gold from Lecter's hair and in the flecks in his eyes, all Will can think of is frothed coffee and chrome, his towel uncomfortably clammy in his hands as his mind gets stuck buffering. Somewhere around Lecter's newly exposed collarbones.

It's a little bewildering to see the esteemed Dr. Lecter out of a three-piece (though the plaid has somehow survived the transition), but leather is undeniably a good look on him. Will has to wet his dry lips when the jacket comes off and reveals a cream v-neck sweater beneath, its thin material clinging lovingly to the muscles shifting in Lecter's back when Lecter turns around to hang up his things on Will's coat rack. Sleeves riding up just a little, showing off the fine bones of his wrists.

Italian sun, frothed coffee, chrome and cream.

Somehow, Lecter had seemed *less* casual whilst naked. Somehow -

"You should take care you don't catch a cold," Lecter says, drawing close enough his fingertips can touch the still-damp strands of Will's curls. This close, his intent gaze is like a shot of hot whiskey sliding down Will's throat, bringing a flush embarrassingly quickly to Will's cheeks and spilling warmth down to his belly.

It doesn't help that it is only *now* Will realises, in his haste to get dressed, he had grabbed an older sweater of his to pull on: a thing with an abominably *low* scooped neck, moss green wool stretched wide with age. Will's skin is exposed across almost the full length of his shoulders, his throat - and scent glands - provocatively bared whichever way he turns his head.

"I'll just -" Will takes a step back now his brain has decided to kick-start from its unhelpful location in his pants, gesturing uselessly towards the depths of his house, his dining table and the kitchen. And then fleeing in that direction.

Will has no idea what *he'll just,* not with his vision now compromised with gold at the edges, though he does manage to furiously scrub the towel once more over his hair to dry it before dropping it on a hook in his mudroom.

Thank God for scent-blockers.

Lecter follows Will to the dining table. There are no antlers or candles or any other type of fancy centrepiece on its surface, merely two rectangular grey placemats that Will had once picked up in a set from Walmart. (Buster had stolen one of the two remaining mats in the set a few years back, chewed it liberally, and then buried it down an abandoned rabbit hole.)

“I wasn’t sure what tableware or cutlery to get out,” Will says a little awkwardly, not sure how to help as Lecter sets his insulated bag down on a nearby side-table and begins unpacking the spoils from its various compartments.

“Shall we have *service à la française*?” Lecter asks. Will is not opposed - it saves someone having to get up from the table if there’s more than one course. “Very well. Two plates with a deep well, if you have them, or two deep bowls if you do not. Two bowls, two plates for dessert, and a smaller flat plate. And two glasses, with ice?”

“You do drinks as well?”

Lecter only shoots Will an amused look - as if to say, *oh, but of* course -, the ass.

Will departs to fetch what he’s been asked for, along with cutlery.

Two small cakes have found their way onto the table before Will returns, and, as Will sets the cutlery, a glass and a deep plate each at each place as Lecter directs him, they are quickly joined by pumpkin spice cookie balls and chocolate-covered stuffed dates in Will’s two bowls. Each side-plate receives a small, beautiful bread roll, and two sticky toffee apples on their traditional sticks go on the small flat plate. A sleek thermos still cool to the touch is sat opposite.

It’s a feast in excess for only two people - an autumnal cornucopia -, and Will has to stare.

“Did you make all this fresh, or is this your leftover Halloween candy?” Will asks - and then colours, hearing his own words spoken aloud. Rubs awkwardly at the vast expanse of one of his bare shoulders, warming the skin with his palm. “I. Did not mean that as rudely as it came out.”

Lecter hums, laying a serving knife beside each cake and a serving spoon in the centre of the table, apparently taking no offence. “One cake is fresh, though the other desserts are the remnants of what I dispensed to the young children of acquaintances who called so hopefully at my door last night.”

“You got left with a *whole cake?* ”

“I initially made three,” Lecter says mildly. “But I could dispense my homemade goods only to those callers of prior acquaintance. Due to the - not unfounded - fears of adulterated candies and undeclared allergens, many parents and wiser children prefer their treats to come in sealed packaging with rigorously thorough ingredients lists.”

Don’t take candy from strangers - unless it’s Halloween: in which case, take the candy only if you can be pretty sure no-one has stuck gluten, lactose, nuts, animal fats, drugs, rat poison or needles in it. (Even legitimate weed brownies handed out by friends are suspect. Will had been dragged to a Halloween house party during his second year at Tulane, eaten three, and then spent the rest of the night crying about dogs in cute Halloween costumes on somebody’s front lawn whilst the strange, sympathetic alpha girl who had been petting his head kept trying to give him her phone number. She had eventually managed to write it on Will’s arm, but, after wiping his face clean, stumbling back to his own dorm, and devouring his entire

body weight in bad pizza and dry cereal, Will had accidentally smeared it beyond recognition.)

“There are worse things to eat out there than shitty marshmallow ghosts,” Will says - mostly just to see Lecter wince at the reminder of Will’s tragic candy bowl raids.

Having donned Will’s (least holey) pair of oven gloves, Lecter returns to his insulated bag to lift out something that looks like a wide, deep ceramic flowerpot with handles, still steaming with heat. It takes pride of place on the table, and Lecter doesn’t bother to mask his own satisfaction at it being there.

“Our main course this evening is a cassoulet, a peasant dish popular in the Toulouse, Carcassonne and Castelnaudary regions of France. The name of the dish comes from the pot - *la cassole* - it is traditionally baked in.” Lecter gestures to the pot’s steep sides, placing the oven gloves neatly away. “The form of the inverted cone shapes the crust. White beans are stewed very slowly with meat, typically pork or duck and sausages - though the chef can, of course, also use whatever else they have to hand."

Using up whatever's in the cupboards that needs to be used: a common theme for poor folks' dinner the world over. Necessity is the mother of invention, and all that.

Of course, the ingredients that Lecter has to use up are more expensive than most.

"Our cassoulet uses confit duck, lamb, pork and Toulouse sausages. Something warm and filling for the colder nights creeping in.”

“It smells amazing,” Will admits as he takes a seat, because it *does.* The meaty aroma in the steam has brought at least four of his dogs over to investigate, though they depart with their tails between their legs when Will gives them a reproving *tsst* and points them back to the front room.

“It will taste even better,” Lecter promises him.

The crust of the cassoulet gives way to the serving spoon with an auspicious *crack;* Lecter loads up their plates and they both tuck in.

Crispy duck confit melts immediately on Will’s tongue along with a mouthful of fat sliced sausage and soft white beans: a rich and savoury mouthful that is almost a shame to swallow and make disappear. Will is quick to replace it with another, the bowl of his spoon slick against his lips.

The cassoulet is still hot after Lecter’s hour-long drive from Baltimore, its meat tender and the cuts of pork and lamb as good as indistinguishable from one another in the stew, having obviously been cooked for hours beforehand. (God, where does Lecter find the time?) There are softened carrots, onions and garlic beside the sweet-saltiness of the meat and crunch of bread - and an iced cranberry cider smash to wash it all down with: the contents of Lecter’s thermos.

The cocktail is a cloudy one, sweet and smoky with a mix of maple syrup, cranberry juice, apple cider and some damn good bourbon. Floating cranberries bump up against Will's top lip and teeth as he drinks, leaving behind small red stains Will swipes away with a flick of his tongue.

He catches Lecter's eyes watching his mouth as he does so - so does it again, just to watch that dark maroon gaze darken further. Out of sight, Will's bare toes curl beneath the table.

Trick or treat, trick or treat; give me something good to eat.

Aside from the verbose introductions to dish and drink, their dinner is a quiet one, both of them basking in the peace that comes at the end of a long week of work, in warm, good food, and agreeable company in good temper. Will enjoys it, despite it being an unusual experience: being allowed to just *be* in the presence of another, without the other person demanding something of him, in the comfort and security of his own home with a gradually-filling belly.

All Lecter seems to want is for Will to enjoy his meal.

When their plates are cleared, Lecter offers Will a second helping of the cassoulet, which Will has to decline if he has any hopes of finding room in his stomach for any of the sweets.

The principal dessert is one of the cakes: *torta alla Monferrina,* according to Lecter, an autumn speciality from the Monferrato hills in north-western Italy. The cake is flourless, made with apples, pumpkin, dried figs, sugar, chocolate, amaretto, and rum, and looks like the best kind of fudgy chocolate brownie.

The other - leftover - cake is a toffee apple sponge.

"No pecan pie?" Will asks lightly, teasing, as Lecter piles up a portion of everything on a plate for him. Will is going to have to *roll* through the rest of his weekend.

"Not until I've perfected the recipe," Lecter says, peculiarly serious.

Will blinks at him for a moment, confused by the unexpected weight behind that response, but is quickly distracted by the plate full of good things that Lecter places smoothly before him.

The *torta alla Monferrina* is clearly the focal point of the plate, but around that dark square of cake Lecter has arranged a toffee apple, a handful each of the pumpkin spice cookie balls and chocolate-covered stuffed dates, and a daunting wedge of the toffee apple cake.

Something fancy - and then more plebeian treats. All this following a whiskey drink and a peasant dish, clearly catered to Will's tastes. Despite himself- oh fuck it, Will is charmed.

The fact the Italian not-a-brownie is painfully delicious, rich and moist and fudgy, has nothing to do with it.

Will eats until it feels as though he could burst if one more morsel were to pass his lips, and then halfheartedly bickers with Lecter about what to do with all the leftovers. Of which there

is a *lot.* Lecter wants to leave them all with Will, which Will cannot in good conscience allow without one hell of a protest - but. He's warm and full and lazy, and the alcohol and Lecter's determined argument of '*Will, I made these for* you' brings a flush to Will's cheeks that seems to have set up a permanent home there that evening.

As Lecter starts hunting out plastic tubs to distribute the remains of the cassoulet and treats into, Will starts washing up. The air is soft with chemical pine and bubbles - and Lecter's gold-spice-warmth radiating all along Will's side when the beta joins him at the sink, a worn dishtowel in his hands as he rubs Will's tableware dry.

They work quietly together, the electrics humming under the *clack* and *clink* of cutlery, glasses and plates, the wind whispering in the trees outside. The dogs shifting and snuffling in the living room. Time slows down like a drip of honey, amber sap - everything enclosed, slow and safe, in this little quiet pool of light.

"I need to walk the dogs after this," Will says eventually, quietly, offering his guest another plate to dry. "Would you like to come with me?"

He can feel Lecter's gaze searing into the side of his head, hot on Will's brow as Lecter tries to catch Will's eyes. Wet fingers. The drips of water down Will's wrist. He fails.

"...Working off our meal?" Lecter inquires at last, all that warmth in his voice as well, melting Will's bones.

His hip bridges the scant gap that had been between them as he turns to set down the dried plate, a press of firm heat over bone.

Will has to - one-handed - grip the sink for support, weight rocking onto the balls of his feet. "Something like that," he agrees distractedly, and hopes he doesn't sound as breathless as he feels.

A small shining soap bubble drifts past his face.

Lecter accepts. When the food is away, the dishes done, and boots, gloves, scarves and jackets donned, they head out into the black of the night together, and Will's pack streams ahead of them in a shadowy river of bounding paws and swishing tails.

It's so cold outside, but Will hardly notices. Lecter keeps close by his side, and, from the inside-out, Will feels like he could be glowing.

The woods around Will's little house in Wolf Trap are lovely, dark and deep, alive even in the night with covert animal rustlings and the wind in the trees. Two days out from a new moon

and a good half mile from the lights of Will's home the sky is all yawning blackness swept with stars, and the smell of the wild in the crisp new November air tastes like witchcraft on the tongue.

Hannibal's senses are stirred by the sounds and smells all around him: the woods themselves and all the animals that must dwell within it, the panting and padding of each of Will's dogs as they dart ahead on their route, and the warm breathing body of Will himself at Hannibal's side. Fairfax county is hardly the middle of nowhere, but, like this, at this moment, in the dark promise of the woods and the night, Hannibal and Will could be the last two humans in the world.

Darkness becomes Will. It silvers the line of his throat and the cut of his jaw, and turns his luminous eyes and hair to pools of drowning ink. If Hannibal were to reach out and touch Will's face, the night's magic would let the colour spill out over Hannibal's fingertips, the promising shadow of Will's mouth smeared by Hannibal's thumb even as Hannibal's own mouth sought out the vast sweep of pale bare skin Will has currently hidden away beneath his jacket, the unwrapped gift of throat, clavicles and shoulders.

Unfortunately for Hannibal, Will seems to have brought a self-appointed chaperone along with them on their walk: the mutt Will had called Winston. Clearly the smartest of the seven, the dog has chosen not to bound off into the trees with the rest of his pack and has instead protectively inserted his furry body between Hannibal and Will as they walk together, determined to be a hindrance to Hannibal's efforts to seduce his master. Hannibal is restricted to keeping an eye on their scenery and making light conversation with Will about their working week, unable to thwart Will's determined furry guardian in a way Will wouldn't object to whilst minding his own step in the woods, roots and fallen branches underfoot, unfamiliar bushes snagging idly at his clothes.

The nights are damp this time of year. Off the beaten path, boots easily stick in the cold mud.

Grudgingly, Hannibal has to admire Winston's stubbornness, the streak of obvious intelligence in the mutt's eyes. Unlike the other six canines, Winston had recognised the threat in Hannibal and refused to consider it diminished even with a bribe, loyally, determinedly, placing himself between that threat and his newfound master. And refusing to budge.

For the full half hour of their walk.

"You look put-out, doctor," Will teases him, touching his fingers to the crease of Hannibal's elbow for a moment to guide Hannibal around a fallen log as they turn back towards the house. "Did you get something nasty on your shiny boots?"

"Strangely enough, I do *not* recall a warning about there being something nasty out here to step in," Hannibal sallies back, taking the opportunity to step closer to Will and push Winston out just in front of the two of them. The dog gives him a dirty look, but Hannibal ignores him and turns his next question to a murmur close by the shell of Will's ear. "Was I led out here under false pretences?"

Will, delightfully, shivers, and tries to mask it by lifting his hand to that same ear, leaning away from Hannibal to tuck his hair back behind it. “I would think someone who is at least *reasonably* intelligent should already know that woods, in general, tend to contain many nasty things, and so, when planning to go for a trek in them, should be prepared accordingly.”

“Putting aside the implicit remark about my *reasonable* intelligence -” Hannibal says, smiling when Will begins to laugh beside him, “I would remind you that physical, mental, and emotional preparedness are all separate considerations. An individual may be fully prepared in advance for anything the elements may physically throw at him, but only understand the full mental and emotional ramifications after the fact.”

The white fangs of Will’s grin flash in the dark. “You need to be prepared *emotionally* to get coyote shit on your boots?”

“If I were actually attached to this pair, I might never recover.”

Will starts laughing again, the sound bubbling out of him good-naturedly and inviting Hannibal to grin along with him. Hannibal does so, content to join in with the joke at his expense since it is buying him something of much more value, Will closing the distance between them once more, his shoulders loose and relaxed at Hannibal’s side.

Two of the smaller dogs of Will’s pack have now joined Winston to trot just ahead of them on the way back to the house, proudly carrying one large stick - a branch, really - between them. The sight is comical, and even Winston seems to have forgotten to devote all his distrust at Hannibal, kept busy trying to avoid getting accidentally swiped into a bush by the business end of a tree branch when one of his siblings forgets that their stick has dangerously widened their circumference.

Hannibal has enjoyed seeing these woods, Will’s own land and haunts, through Will’s eyes, at Will’s side. It is easier to walk a mile in another man’s boots than in his brain, and Will has given Hannibal something very close to both in one nocturnal wander.

Ahead of them, through the trees, the lights of Will’s house come into view.

The dogs all race ahead immediately, dropping any burdens they might be carrying and breaking the treeline to bound gleefully across the fields to their home. Will, however, pauses as they leave the dark depths of the woods, reaching out to touch Hannibal’s arm to bring Hannibal to a curious halt beside him as well. He doesn’t say anything or even look at Hannibal whilst doing so; instead, Will’s gaze is fixed ahead, looking across the fields after his dogs, at his home.

His expression and form possess, for the moment, all the serenity of the classical statues of old, his body still but loose and open, his colours lost to the shadows of night and his eyes turned to flat discs of reflected light. A not-quite smile hovers on Will’s lips that could promise either divine benevolence or mockery, and, when the breeze grows still for a moment, the illusion becomes complete: even Will’s wild curls take rest for a moment upon his head, framing a face caught, it feels like, in a moment of sweetness for the ages.

After a few silent minutes of scrutiny, Hannibal turns his own eyes away from Will's face to the view that has his companion so enthralled - unsure as to what exactly Will is trying to show him, but pleased that Will *is* showing it to him. To share something with Hannibal that brings him such a sweet tranquillity, handing Hannibal one of the small shining keys that secure his beguiling soul.

Will's house lies ahead of them, golden light spilling out of its windows into the darkness around it like candlelight in a church on a cold winter's night. Something of the sight of it feels like warmth, feels like sanctuary, the wind stirring the grass of the fields around the small dreaming home as though parting the waters for Will and Hannibal to get there. Seven dogs already romp on the porch, the playful sound of their occasional barks mixing with the sound of the wind in the woods and fields, all the movements of the night.

Outside in the breathing darkness, Will moves again at last. His hand slides down Hannibal's arm, pressure and warmth against cloth and hide, tracing almost reverently around the scent gland in Hannibal's wrist and into the valley of his palm. There, Will weaves their fingers lightly together, his chilled bare skin against the leather of Hannibal's gloves.

Hannibal keeps his eyes on Will's house but a quiet triumph preens inside his chest. Only a little while ago Will had scaled the ladder to Hannibal's mezzanine rather than bodily come within so many metres of Hannibal, and now, here he is, actively seeking out Hannibal's touch. Again.

"It's late," Will says. His words seem to bloom organically from the darkness rather than interrupt it.

Hannibal doesn't reply, letting the quiet hang. Giving Will the space to continue as he pleases.

"You could stay. If you'd rather not make the long drive back to Baltimore tonight." Will gives Hannibal's hand a brief squeeze before retracting it, drawing Hannibal's gaze back to him and the hesitant flicker of his smile. "Wouldn't want you falling asleep behind the wheel."

"Is there somewhere else you'd rather I fall asleep, Will?" Hannibal inquires - and then smiles as well in encouragement, coaxing Will into unfurling from his defensive ball once more. Will must be starved of smiles for the way he softens at the sight of them, for the way he must often search for a few stunned seconds before one hitches itself into place upon his lips in response. "In the interests of personal safety, of course."

"There's no- I have a spare bed that you're more than welcome to, if you just want to crash. But if you're still… If you'd like -" Will takes a deep breath, his tongue flicking out to wet his lips as he looks up at Hannibal from under his long eyelashes. The lights of his house pick out every strand in filigree gold. "I've been rethinking your comment about us being friends-with-benefits."

"But that would involve us being *friends*," Hannibal teases, letting his tone rest on the edge of gentle mocking. Turning Will's own words back on him from their evening talk outside the hospital.

Will gives him a *look* for that, arch little thing, but steps in close enough his boots bump up against Hannibal's, chest to chest. Hannibal doesn't protest or step away, allowing Will to spread his hands against Hannibal's chest for balance, allowing Will to rest just a little of his weight against Hannibal as he stretches up against Hannibal just enough to rub their cheeks lightly together.

The slow drag of smooth skin and stubble is both placatory and provocative, Will in entirety: something soft and a little of the sharp showing from underneath. It leaves behind Will's scent on Hannibal's jaw - currently, sweet, cheap shampoo and strong, infuriatingly bland and chemical scent-blockers - and spreads Hannibal's scent to Will, marking them both for each other. It sends pleasant shudders down their spines when they both smell their mingled scents on each other, when their hot breaths brush against each other's cheeks in the chill of the night.

Will's eyes, when Hannibal tips his head down at last to fully look at them, have blown black with desire, thinly ringed and all but glowing with omega gold. Their noses bump together, and Hannibal enjoys the moment, enjoys the night and the heat and Will's open, naked desire for him, the way Will's lips part for him when Hannibal dips even closer to it to murmur one last amused and inquiring, "Friends?"

"Something like that, yeah," Will breathes against his mouth, and kisses him.

Will tastes smoky and sweet, the leftover savoury notes of their dinner layered beneath the flavours of apples and sugar and chocolate, the warm heat of bourbon, cider and rum. Ozone lingers on his lips, well-kissed by the wind well before Hannibal had gotten there, and their breath between them creates dragon-smoke in the chill air.

Hannibal has to hold him - and Will seems to enjoy the feeling of Hannibal's leather-clad fingers dragging through his hair, leaning into the sensation, into the kiss, his skull cradled in the cup of Hannibal's palm when Hannibal raises it to curve around the line of his jaw. One of his hands shifts upwards to grip Hannibal's shoulder, thumb pressed to Hannial's collarbone - and brings with it a wave of new scents, intrusive.

Will's scent-blockers are a constant background of blandness that Hannibal has just resigned himself to bearing tonight until he can get Will to sweat or wash them off, but the smells clinging to the sleeve of Will's jacket are a completely separate offence. With the night breeze, the blockers and a dog between them, Hannibal had missed the scents marking Will's jacket, the trace-oils left behind on the piece of clothing by other people. Heaviest on the one arm but all down Will's side as well, they smell like an unknown alpha - no, *alphas -,* something overly sweet that cloys against Hannibal's palate all mixed up with spice, mouldering dirt and rancid fatty musk. Burnt coffee, burnt sugar, and salt.

The stink of alpha desire, ugly longing, and cheap cafeteria food.

At least one particularly malodorous alpha has set their sights on Will Graham, and Will had let them *touch* him.

Is that why Will is wearing scent-blockers? It would be somewhat gauche, after all, to seduce one friend whilst stinking of the ardour of another - of *others -,* especially when asking a beta

to supplant the traditional role of an alpha in an omega's bed. Or perhaps -

Will's eyes flutter open at the twist of Hannibal's mouth, his cheeks kiss-flushed and pupils still blown black by more than the dark of the night. In the depths of them, something lovely and vicious and *hungry* uncoils to meet Hannibal's gaze and Hannibal finds himself grinning savagely at it in response, his lips pulled back just enough to show his teeth, his thumb rubbing small tender circles in the hollow behind Will's ear.

I am going to slowly remove the fingers of every alpha who dared to touch you, joint by little joint.

"You *have* been thinking," Hannibal murmurs, pleased at the little half-nuzzle-nudge Will does unthinkingly into his hand. It does something to soothe the beast snarling at the back of Hannibal's skull, stalking through the hallways of his mind in search of explanations.

"Always thinking, that's me." Will's lips quirk up into a lopsided smile, half full of shadows and all the more charming because of it. "Have you any opinions on the topic?"

"It's rapidly endearing itself to me anew," says Hannibal, and dips in close again for another kiss.

Hannibal doesn't require something as crude as a *knot* to make his bedpartners forget their own name. If Will has taken other lovers, Hannibal will see to it that those other lovers are soon discarded and disappear, and if Will is simply being pursued by others, consumed as they are by lust as well as their own hubris - *well.* It will be all the easier to make them depart even quicker. Hannibal only *shares* when it is necessary to do so, and it is *entirely* unnecessary to have some unknown and unworthy alpha turning Will's head away from him, seeding wild thoughts into the precious, fertile cradle of Will's skull.

Should affairs end amicably with Will, Hannibal would be content to arrange introductions between Will and an alpha Hannibal believes might *actually* be a good and worthy match for him. Will would hardly be the first of Hannibal's bedpartners to have been gently steered into a new, prosperous relationship after their sexual and/or romantic entanglement with Hannibal had reached the end of its usefulness, and the emotional interest Hannibal accrues by being the midwife to favourable matches between others often pays him further dividends down the line. A significant number of happy couples now feel indebted to Hannibal for their mated and/or matrimonial bliss, spreading word of Hannibal's good name throughout society whilst permanently reserving him a place at their business establishments, speeding up his private orders and putting him in touch with friends of 'friends' for whatever Hannibal might be interested in throughout the world.

For Will… for Will, perhaps another one of Hannibal's old paramours might be best, an Anglo-Dutch alpha woman with a silver tongue almost as quick as her feet. Lysanne. A former ballerina - and an especially divine Swan Queen, to Hannibal's memory -, the lady in question now works as a private physiotherapist just outside of New York, restoring vintage motorcycles on occasional commission. Will and she could bond over poking at engine parts and walking - between them - their nine assorted dogs, and their children would be blessed with intelligence, agility, fortitude and stamina as they tumble about in the wealthy suburbs with their parents and ever-increasing pack of canine companions. Hopefully inheriting their

father's love and talent for the arts, as well as their mother's particular fascinating mind, as, with such parentage, their natural aesthetic beauty would already be almost certainly guaranteed.

It would be a shame for Will's dark curls and storm-ridden eyes to die with him, and a *travesty* for the world to lose his mind. Lysanne could make a beautiful mother of him, and her own curiosity about the world's darker corners would mean she would not stifle the poetic impulses of Will's sharp soul.

Alana, much as she may be attracted to Will Graham, cannot breed him without outside help, and she is too rigidly, socially *moral* to make a good third on the path Hannibal hopes Will might continue upon. Her goodness is something admirable but detrimental to Hannibal's hopes for Will's development, and so her nascent fluttering feelings for Will Graham need to be either diverted or extinguished.

Hannibal's lips part from Will's with a soft wet sound, still tingling from heat, pressure.

"I'm not looking for a serious relationship, doctor," Will murmurs, his fingers still tellingly clenched in the material of Hannibal's jacket. Wary here, at a line in the sand, though the air between them is still warm.

"That's more than fair," Hannibal tells him solicitously, watching Will relax again by increments as Hannibal smoothes his hand up Will's spine, coaxing this wild thing to melt against him, "as nor am I. However, since we're embracing the casual, perhaps you might simply call me Hannibal?"

Deliciously crisp as *Dr. Lecter* sounds in Will's mouth, intimacies of every kind will be easier to encourage if they are both on a first-name basis.

A tinge of pink stains Will's cheekbones anew, the flush of colour bleeding out into the gold made of his skin by the lights of his home. "Hannibal."

Hannibal smiles and rewards Will with another brief kiss, swallowing the quick little rolling chirp of Will's pleasure from the back of his mouth and then releasing him before Will can fall wholly against him. The house waiting for them across the field would be a better place for them to continue, a beacon to the comforts of the indoors.

They return there, and Will busies himself wiping down the paws of his dogs on the porch as Hannibal fetches the go-bag he keeps in the trunk of his car: a leftover habit from his days working in the Emergency Room.

Will glances up from cleaning Max's paws to eye the bag slung over Hannibal's shoulder meaningfully. "Presumptuous?"

"Hopeful," Hannibal serenely corrects, blocking two of the already-cleaned dogs from trotting back off the porch with his body.

Winston, his paws already cleaned, sits beside Will, his furry body once more blocking the omega from Hannibal. Will doesn't seem to notice, releasing Max to join his brothers and

hauling in a wriggling Buster.

“Hope is a thing with feathers.”

“And the thing with paws is…”

“Statistically?” Will sighs, the towel in his hands marked heavily with brown. “Muddy.”

When the dogs are all clean the pack is sent inside to their beds. Will and Hannibal follow them, removing their shoes at the door so as not to undo all of Will’s good work in keeping his floors clean. Shedding the rest of their outer wear as well.

Hannibal assists Will in pulling down the blinds over his wide windows, switching on the space heater in front of the fireplace for the dogs and turning off the lights, but, before Will can extinguish the last few low lights around his bed, Will hesitates, looking back at Hannibal with a question in his eyes.

Hannibal regards him placidly. “If you have changed your mind about any of your earlier offers, Will, I will not take offence.”

He will, however, do his best to change Will’s mind *back* again.

“It’s not -” Will wavers again, before flicking his gaze eloquently to the set of seven pairs of watchful canine eyes sitting in their dog beds. And back to Hannibal again. “There’s the spare bed upstairs.”

Ah, he’s worried about their audience.

“Do you sleep there?” Hannibal already knows the answer even before Will, flustered, shakes his head. The linens on the camp bed - interestingly situated - in Will’s living room are fresh, but the mattress underneath them and the furniture around that area is still perfumed with the scent of sleep: of loose hair, warm, sweet skin and Will’s sweat. And dogs.

Many, many dogs.

Hannibal has very little desire to spend his nights regularly swamped by dogs and sleeping on a *camp bed* of all things - and a rather old and cheap-looking one at that -, but making Will Graham feel ashamed of his furry companions and his own belongings will only alienate the omega from Hannibal. Put Will on the defensive, and build resentment. For whatever reason - because Will can surely afford a better bed on an FBI professor’s annual salary -, Will regularly sleeps on a terrible bed in his living room, surrounded by his beloved dogs, and Hannibal will simply have to deal with that in order to integrate himself further into Will’s life.

Until Hannibal can kindly, carefully, steer Will into making better choices, anyway.

Where does Will even nest? Hannibal does not know many omegas that would favour Will’s living room as the place to comfortably build their nests: the space is far too open and exposed, with too many points of entry and wide staring windows.

Nesting and denning - both the building of and residing in a nest or den - are encouraged as a soothing method across all genders and dynamics, with omegas preferring the former and alphas the latter, but nesting out in the open often leaves omegas on-edge and anxious, and the scent of anxiety building up in one's nest only hastens the decline of the omega's mood. When things get bad in a nest, without immediate attention, they nearly always get *worse.*

Then again, most of the omegas Hannibal interacts with enough to be even tangentially aware of their nesting habits have families, and so build their nests not only for themselves but for or to share with their partners and/or children. They have others willing to go *outside* the nest when the omega is not, a line of defence beyond the omega's personal awareness and abilities.

If Will nests in his living room he might feel exposed, but he'd certainly be able to defend himself better with seven loyal dogs around him and clear lines of sight for miles. With his general attitude and ability to keep his head in times of danger and stress… truly, Will could stage a ferocious defence.

Hannibal hums, and reels Will in by his empty belt loops. "Here will do."

"Oh, your munificence knows no bounds."

Hannibal allows his face to crease into a smile at Will's dry sarcasm, sharp hips at last between his hands, Will warm and pliant before him. The perfect shape and height to hold. "Shall I tell you a secret? I have thought about putting my mouth on the lovely bare line of your throat from the moment you opened your front door."

Will's own smile is a pleased - a little embarrassed - thing, his fingers hooking themselves into the front of Hannibal's cream sweater like the kneading claws of a cat. His neck is arched back - just so -, showing off the pale column of his throat that Hannibal has been admiring all evening, the naked curves to his shoulders, the spread wings of his collarbones beneath the skin. "You weren't subtle."

Will shivers when Hannibal chuckles, but that may be because Hannibal has pressed the sound of it to his skin, conquering temptation at last by submitting to it and pressing his mouth in slow wet kisses down the pulse in Will's throat.

It is *more* than worth the awful chemical taste of scent-blockers to have Will's tender flesh against his lips and teeth again at last. The sight of Will so soft at the door - old sweater slipping off his shoulders and over his hands, bare toes poking out beneath soft denim cuffs and damp curls drying in windblown disarray - had made Hannibal's mouth water and teeth itch just as much as his reptilian brain, the promise of such a tempting prize in reach demanding Hannibal *take, take, take.* Each day and night are made for seizing - and so, in this moment, is Will Graham, the plush curves of his ass nicely filling Hannibal's palms.

Will gasps when Hannibal's tongue laves once over one of his scent glands, cupping Hannibal's jaw between his hands to lift Hannibal's kisses back to his mouth. Hannibal obliges him, parting Will's lips with his tongue to taste him there all over again, alcohol and sugar still sweet inside the seam of his lips.

Will's hands slide into Hannibal's hair and he sucks on Hannibal's tongue with a hungry little sound that sinks, burning, straight from the back of his throat to Hannibal's cock. Hannibal lets his hips roll forward with the urge, pressing his full body against the slighter man in his arms and grinding his hardness against Will's obvious rising own.

Will gasps again - tempting thing -, eagerly mirroring the motion once, twice, before Hannibal slides to his knees before him, lifting Will's sweater to press a quick hot kiss against the skin of the omega's trembling belly. If Hannibal could, he would have his mouth all over Will, tasting him all at once as their dinner, *service à la française*.

"Hannibal," Will breathes - and again when Hannibal unzips his fly, dragging down jeans and boxers and swallowing the jump of Will's cock to the root in one smooth motion.
"Hannibal!"

Will has a generally unremarkable cock for an omega, neither too long nor too short, circumcised as many American men are. It curves gently upwards at full mast, its thickness stretching Hannibal's lips nicely and its dewing tip rubbing against his hard palate as he moves his head lazily back and forth, drawing Will deeper into his mouth when Will rocks himself forward with a moan. When Hannibal uses his grasp on Will's ass to coax him to do so, starting to slowly thrust into the clench of Hannibal's throat.

Hannibal encourages him by rubbing his tongue hard against the underside, hollowing his cheeks to suck when Will is at his deepest so the suction drags against Will's dick as he rolls his hips away. Forwards again, and Hannibal hums in pleasure at the sound of Will's sharp little breaths above him, the growing salty-sweet slickness he can taste at the back of his mouth.

Of the main dynamics, omegas tend to be the better-tasting, their innate sweetness tempering most ill-effects caused by poor diet or unlucky genetics. Will's diet could desperately handle some improvement - it features too much bad coffee, for one -, but his genetics ring true: the pheromones of Will's slick carry echoes of his scent, salt-sweet over sweet smoke, the cool shock of ozone Hannibal swallows around again for the taste just as much as the feeling of nails digging into his scalp. Scratching through his hair as Will's control begins to fail.

By his own allowance, Hannibal permits the building heat to suffuse his own body, his own cock pressing thick and urgent against the fly of his trousers, his nipples rising to hard points to rub against the soft fabric on the inside of his sweater. The cloth of his trousers is no real protection for Hannibal's knees against the inflexibility of Will's floorboards, the strain beginning to build in the muscles of Hannibal's thighs, tension locking low into his back and his breath coming a shade quicker through his nose.

Will's knees buckle after one particularly hard suck and Hannibal, gripping hard now around the other man's thighs, is probably the only reason Will remains standing. Will laughs a little at that, high and breathless with pleasure and still managing to be self-effacing, sharing his amusement with Hannibal when Hannibal gives him another wicked glance up from beneath his eyelashes.

"C'mere," Will entreats, smiling, tugging playfully with the hands he still has tangled up in Hannibal's hair to make it clear he means *come* up *here,* flushed pink in the face and with his

eyes a bright and gleaming gold. When Hannibal only swallows around his cock again, he laugh-gasps before he swears, pulling at Hannibal's hair more firmly. "Come *here,* Jesus, are you trying to suck my brain out of my dick?"

Hannibal pulls off Will's cock to chuckle at that, resting his face for a moment against the other man's hip. "Your nervous system appears to be enjoying the attempt."

"Yeah, yeah," Will huffs at him, remarkably composed for a man whose cock is still bobbing, blood-red, spit-slick and desirous, beside Hannibal's cheek. His nails scratch across Hannibal's scalp again - a light furrow, pleasant, like one might stroke through the fur of a cat.

Hannibal mouths another wet kiss to the side of cock again, just to see what Will will do, and isn't disappointed when the omega calls him another rude name, gripping Hannibal's shoulder to pull him to his feet. *Carpe noctem.*

"Bed," Will half-begs, half-demands, pushing Hannibal back across the floor until the back of his knees hit the camp bed behind him and Hannibal is forced to sit on it or fall.

Hannibal sits and Will immediately crawls onto his lap. He draws Hannibal into another smattering of kisses, using the distraction to pull off Hannibal's shirt and then laughing at the disarray it makes of Hannibal's hair. His fingers rake down Hannibal's chest, and Hannibal hopes they leave marks like the last time, breaking skin and leaving blood trails whose sting had reminded Hannibal for the next few days of having this particular wild creature in his bed.

"I want to ride you until you come," Will tells him, forthright as a devoted sinner in the confessional box, "and then I want to fuck you."

"By all means," Hannibal murmurs, mouth wet against Will's jaw, his voice still rough from swallowing Will so deep. Far be it from Hannibal to argue with the aroused omega on his lap who knows exactly what they want.

Begrudgingly, Will has to get up to go and raid a dog-proof box under his bedside table. The spoils of his trip are thrust aggressively against Hannibal's chest before he starts to undress: a bottle of lube and a box of condoms.

Knotting condoms.

"...I'm flattered," Hannibal says, carefully bland after a moment's pause, his gaze flickering between the box and the easy way Will is dropping his jeans and underwear the rest of the way to the floor, "but I fear you may have forgotten my anatomy."

Will glances back at him, perplexed, before he realises all at once what he's given Hannibal and flushes a dull red. The knotting condoms are grabbed, and Will quickly replaces them with a box suitable for phalluses without a knot at the base. Ever prepared.

Omegas are only fertile during their heats and, occasionally, either side of them, but, as they had both attested to their good health before going to bed the first time, condoms still help

with clean-up.

They both set about removing their clothes - or the rest of their clothes, in Will's case. One of the dogs barks when Will's socks get tossed away haphazardly into the darker corners of the room, and Hannibal moves up the bed as Will scolds it, making himself at home amongst Will's - distressingly thin - pillows, the top sheet and covers tossed aside.

Will joins him there when he's ready, bare skin unfolding in the lamplight to straddle Hannibal's lap once more. Their neglected cocks bob up against their bellies, Will hissing between his teeth when Hannibal wraps a hand around both to give them a languid stroke, his grip wet immediately with drying saliva and precome.

"Too much?" Hannibal asks him teasingly, receiving an answer by way of Will's exasperated little look. Neither of them wants to end things so quickly. "Very well then."

Will is already pleasingly wet behind when Hannibal reaches around him to touch him there, warm slick spilling out over Hannibal's hand as he circles the rim of Will's hole and then slips two fingers inside. Even the dynamic supposedly 'bred for fucking' appreciates a little preparation before moving things along, and Will's back arches beautifully when Hannibal curls his fingers *just so* inside of him, his pink lips parting in a pretty *o* and on a downright filthy moan as he rocks back onto Hannibal's hand. Beautiful boy.

Hannibal takes the offering of Will's throat to mark it with teeth and tongue, sucking a bruise over Will's pulse that will decorate Will for days to come. He works a third finger into Will, rubbing them ruthlessly across the sensitive spots inside of the omega and grinning when Will snarls at him for it - on far too high a note for it to register as a threat.

"Enough!" Will slaps at Hannibal's chest, picking up the discarded box of condoms and hitting Hannibal with it until he pulls his fingers out of Will and rolls one of them on.

The way Will spreads his thighs and immediately sinks down on Hannibal's cock says something about how frustrated Hannibal has made the other man, and the pleasure of that is *almost* as good as how Will's tight walls feel bearing down around Hannibal. Like fucking up into a warm, silken, squeezing glove.

Will is eloquent when he doesn't think about it, beautiful worlds spilling as much from his tongue as they bloom from his evocative eyes, stories told by the twist of his mouth and in the movement of his hands. There's an honesty in his body that is sometimes missing in the rest of him, and *this,* this raw hunger as he *takes* what he wants from Hannibal feels like one of the most honest things Hannibal has seen so far of Will Graham.

Should fortune allow, Hannibal would like to spend at least one of Will's heats with him. Any deluded alphas - or persons of other dynamics - vying for the same thing will find themselves swiftly removed from the equation by Hannibal, so time and its associated circumstances will be the deciding factors, but a just universe would surely arrange events to *give* Will's heat to Hannibal. Will at his most honest, most base, inhibitions stripped back to combine his needs for sex and violence.

The flashes of Will's ferocity outside of his heat have only stoked Hannibal's appetite for *more* - and what were omegas given claws and fangs for, if not to defend themselves from the unworthy? If not to seize what they desire, no matter the cost? Will, in heat, gold eyes flashing and lips pulled back in a snarl, would be ruinous in ruin, and his submission at his most wild would be the sweetest prize. Mounting him, half out of his mind, when every instinct in Will would have him murder anyone too weak to try.

True to his stated intent, Will rides Hannibal primarily for Hannibal's pleasure rather than his own. That isn't to say Will isn't obviously enjoying himself - his mouth hangs open on harsh pants as he rolls their hips together, no knot required -, but, when Hannibal's cock glances too firmly across his prostate, Will adjusts the angle of his pelvis, his hands curling into ten little sharp points on Hannibal's chest even as his own cock drips messily over Hannibal's belly.

"Beautiful," Hannibal tells him, murmuring the word against Will's panting mouth as he steals kiss after sweet, stinging, nipping kiss, clutching at Will's slim waist and bucking upwards to fuck Will as deeply as possible. He wants Will to work enough to sweat off those ridiculous scent-blockers, and he wants Will to *crave* that work some more. *"Bellissimo.*"

Predictably, Will bites him for the Italian, and Hannibal laughs throatily, pleased when the bite draws blood enough to smear over both their mouths. He presses forward, and fucks the iron taste of himself into Will's mouth with his tongue: *et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius*, as above, so below.

His cock buried in so much tight, rhythmically clenching, heat, Hannibal can feel his own need rising, coiling like a snake of fire low in his abdomen, behind his balls. Will seems determined to drag it from him no matter what and Hannibal isn't inclined to argue with such dedication, pressing open bloody-mouthed kisses down the column of Will's neck and murmuring low nonsense words of encouragement there in at least half a dozen languages.

"Come for me," Will demands of him, clutching Hannibal's head to the crook of his neck with a hard grip on Hannibal's hair.

Presented with such bounty, Hannibal sucks bruises over Will's scent gland, raking the flesh before him with the flat of his teeth until Will shivers again and moans. Making such pretty noises as Hannibal thumbs the dimple of his back, grips the swell of his ass to rut in deep.

Perhaps remembering the strength of Hannibal's entreaty to him in the fields: *"Hannibal.*"

Hannibal jerks and spills into the condom, pulse after pulse after mindless pulse, remembering to turn his head against the burn of Will's grasp so that when he bites down - hard -, he does so against the smooth flesh of Will's shoulder rather than his gland.

Will moans for Hannibal again, his spare hand flying down to push between their bodies and squeeze the base of his cock, staving off the near-orgasm Hannibal can read quivering across all of his nerves, a low sweet note held on the bow. Beautiful, trembling, *needing* thing.

Some of the points of the bite on Will's shoulder are beading with blood. Will lets loose a hazy little *oh* when Hannibal leans in to languidly lick them away, sweat-salt and copper bright on Hannibal's tongue after the dizzy rush of orgasm.

“That can hardly be hygienic.”

“Ah, sexual intercourse, globally renowned as the most hygienic of activities,” Hannibal drawls, licking Will’s blood from his teeth and letting his lips curl up into a satisfied smirk. Unsurprised when Will pulls him into another kiss, wet and deep and hungry.

Hannibal is still smirking when they part again. “I believe you said something about fucking me?”

Rearranging themselves on the bed is less titillating art and more sticky practicalities with percussive bedsprings. Hannibal has a full condom to dispose of and Will a fresh one to don, and the both of them are sheened with sweat and another fresh spill of Will’s slick from his so-recently stretched hole.

Will uses a little of his natural lubrication to stretch Hannibal out before reaching for the synthetic stuff in the half-forgotten bottle, far too gone to tease Hannibal with his fingers for as much or as long as Hannibal had teased him. Inwardly, Hannibal is grateful for the care; it has been a long time since his refractory period was raring to go after a few scant minutes, and exploiting each other’s oversensitivity doesn’t seem to be the game of choice for the night. Another time, certainly.

Even with a trembling wrist and hummingbird pulse, Will’s prep-work is almost polite, three fingers deep and avoiding the lure of Hannibal’s prostate as he works Hannibal wet and open. Flat on his back now, Hannibal is enjoying being the centre of Will’s single-minded focus. It allows him to, once more, study the full bloom of gold in Will’s eyes, the flecks of other colours still gleaming in the iris like many-faceted jewels.

Will is pink now, all over, the blood-flush having spread down his throat from his cheeks and covered his chest. Hannibal wants to taste it again all over, feel the heat of it against his tongue, but must settle for turning his mouth wetly against Will’s wrist when Will reaches up to stroke his jaw, slanting his eyes at Will askance when Will takes that wrist away, his thumb dragging for a moment over the swell of Hannibal’s lips.

Will’s lips quirk up into a smile so Hannibal continues to lie back and let Will touch him, offering his belly in a play of submission. Will has already grasped that Hannibal is not another one of his strays; Hannibal is decidedly more feline, and as willing to instinctively mark with his teeth and claws as the omega is.

Taking the gift he has been given, Will’s free hand flutters down over Hannibal’s ribs as Hannibal holds himself as still as possible, over muscles, thumbing over Hannibal’s nipples and tugging idly through the hair on Hannibal’s chest before rubbing circles with his palm over Hannibal’s abdomen. His nails drag just hard enough to be felt over the firm outer muscle of Hannibal’s thigh, curving inwards until they can rake a little more harshly up the more sensitive inside and Hannibal has to let his breath escape his teeth in a hiss.

“Are you ticklish?” Will asks him inquisitively when Hannibal’s muscle spasms under his touch, wretched, beautiful devilment about his bitten mouth.

“You may have your answer or have *me*,” Hannibal informs him, too tellingly clipped for his own liking.

Will snorts but picks the option both of them prefer, removing his fingers from inside of Hannibal and smoothly replacing them with the steady press of his cock. Hannibal pushes back into it, taking Will into him until their pelvises lie flush and Will is, once more, a wreck atop of him.

As soon as Hannibal nods, relaxed around the stretch, Will begins to move.

Amongst the incredibly conservative, there are some - *fools* - that decry an omega taking the penetrative role, calling it a waste of time at best and unnatural at worst. Omegas are meant to be mounted and bred, and to allow them to do otherwise is supposedly a perversion of their natural *purpose* on earth.

Hannibal would rather like to see Will and any other omegas with even an ounce of his furious beauty tear those imbeciles apart with their teeth. Fuel for their fires, for rutting as they please afterwards in the deep dark pools of heartblood.

Hannibal himself reaps the benefits of keeping an open mind and open legs regardless of gender or dynamic, his own standards far superior to the common social metrics. Penetrating, penetrative or otherwise, sex is a pleasant diversion and a useful tool, and Hannibal has had and been had by men and women, alphas, beta and omegas, and many others who had used different labels to describe themselves. Will is another gorgeous, vicious and fascinating distraction to add to the list - perhaps even a marked highlight, time will tell, but absolutely a tough act to follow.

For now, Hannibal is content to lie back, wrapping his legs around Will’s hips and *enjoying* the smooth roll of the omega’s hips into him, enjoying being enjoyed. Little jolts of pleasure-near-pain keep shuddering up his spine regardless of whether he can get fully hard at the moment, and Will moving above him is a feast for the senses, cheeks flushed pink and lips kiss-swollen, his tousled curls an echo of one of Caravaggio’s beautiful boys. Will’s slick still drips freely from him, wet and shining on the inside of his thighs, more slickness to add to the lube shining around Hannibal’s hole when it runs forward and drips at the place their bodies meet. The wet sounds of their coupling fill the night.

“Should I make you come again?” Will asks, turning the back of soft knuckles against Hannibal’s semi-hard erection where it debates rising once more against the doctor’s belly.

“Do you have the patience?” Hannibal inquires, genuinely interested, and has to laugh when Will obviously takes it as a challenge. Mouth firm, eyes blazing, Will’s next thrust forward is hard and sure against Hannibal’s prostate, his aim sending a *bolt* of pleasure-pain up Hannibal’s spine, leaving him a little winded with the direct stab to his core. “...Another night, I think. Yes.”

Will’s knuckles press down a little more firmly, dragging almost tauntingly at the looser flesh around Hannibal’s foreskin, the sensitive head beneath wetting the back of his hand. “Yes?”

“Yes, *another night.*”

Grinning, fangs still bared, Will leaves Hannibal's overly sensitive cock alone and leans down to kiss Hannibal when Hannibal slings his arms over Will's shoulders, little pants of breath that gust over Hannibal's lips and chin, their mouths catching between drags of their cheeks over each other. Hannibal had not shaved before coming over so his evening shadow has begun to grow in, and the friction of their stubble rubbing together sends prickles of heat through Hannibal's throat and jaw. The faintest threads of Will's true scent *finally* emerges in drifts of wood and spice as they mark each other anew.

"Are you close?" Hannibal murmurs, turning his mouth against the blushing shell of Will's ear and letting one of his hands slide south down the smooth slope of Will's back.

A furrow springs to life between Will's brows, refusing to be smoothed out by the nudge of Hannibal's forehead against it. "Am I- am I hurting you?"

"Sweet thing." Amused at the thought, Hannibal kisses the wrinkle instead, pressing it flat with the imprint of his mouth. "That isn't why I'm asking."

Will frowns against his jawline - and then cries out when Hannibal slips two of his fingers back inside of him, still so wet and open and easy to take advantage of. Will's pace stutters when Hannibal deliberately drags his knuckles against the warm red rim of his ass, twisting his wrist somewhat painfully to get the angle right and press his fingertips against the delicate swell of Will's prostate.

"I-" Will gasps, biting at the bob of Hannibal's throat when his next few thrusts glance off Hannibal's prostate again and Hannibal growls. "Han- Ha - I-"

Will comes, his eyes fluttering closed and mouth falling open as he rides the crest of his orgasm. Like a man drowning. Hannibal pets him through it, continuing to finger Will lazily until Will slows and begins to whimper, his weight falling down more heavily on Hannibal as his breathing returns to normal.

He makes no attempt to pull out of Hannibal and Hannibal makes no attempt to move him, silently counting the beats of Will's heart as it thunders against their ribcages, watching strands of Will's damp hair flutter as they breathe.

Hannibal returns his hands to Will's spine, lulling the wild creature in his arms to complacency with smooth, even strokes of his palms. Will's back and the space between his shoulder blades are slick with sweat, the pink, tender meat oiled and salted, ready for the pan: pre-marked by the butcher, Hannibal's bite on Will's shoulder still congealing around a bruise.

Eventually they part, Will shuffling back and rolling awkwardly to the side to dispose of his condom, the bed protesting the sudden movement with several noisy creaks and squeaks beneath them.

Startlingly, Hannibal finds himself immediately missing the warm stretch of Will inside of him, Will's withdrawal leaving a hollow where he had been. Will's arm flung across Hannibal's belly as the omega flops down on the mattress beside him does something to fill

the ache, Will turned on his side against Hannibal's arm, his forehead pressed to the curve of Hannibal's bicep. Breathing.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head lazily on the pillow to look at Will.

"Not sure they're worth as much as that," Will mumbles. He nuzzles tiredly against Hannibal's arm before lifting his face, the gold slowly bleeding out of his blinking eyes to reveal their storm-blue hearts again.

Hannibal smiles at him, slowly, letting his arm come over Will's arm on his abdomen, his palm cupped around Will's elbow and thumb stroking the joint. "Don't sell yourself so cheap."

Will blinks at him - and then grins, his fangs glinting as he shifts even closer on the bed. "Dr. Lecter, are you saying I'm *cheap?* "

"If it walks like a duck, and self-deprecatingly quacks like a duck -"

Will slaps Hannibal's stomach with the cupped palm of his hand, deliberately more sound than substance, and rolls away with a laugh when Hannibal halfheartedly tries to grab at him. Hannibal gets a pillow to his face for his generosity - and an eyeful, when the sad flat thing falls away from him again, of Will standing by the bed, half in shadow, fucked and naked and glorious. Resting back on his heels, he looks replete - and, in the half-light, dangerous for it, a cat that plays with its prey for sport at leisure rather than devouring it quickly for a meal. An assured little tilt to his chin.

Hannibal had not lied when he had said Will has a beauty to make artists weep, the beguiling looks of muses throughout the ages paling against the fire of his glance. Marked by sex and teeth and blood, inside and out, the dark thing inside of Will has stretched out insouciantly into his bones, at ease in all his skin.

"If I went for what I'm worth, you wouldn't be able to afford me," Will informs Hannibal archly, and misses the savage slash of Hannibal's grin when he turns his back on the bed to begin padding away. How infuriating it is to have him walk away, but how enjoyable to watch him go. "The bathroom's upstairs."

It takes a little more effort than Hannibal would have liked to prise himself out of Will's bed and up the stairs after the other man, pausing only to grab his toothbrush on the way, and even more to perfunctorily scrub himself and his teeth clean. Both he and Will are a mess of lube, slick, sweat, welts, bites and bruises, and, even in the mundanities, Will is a distraction, finger-combing water through his curls until he spots Hannibal watching him and stops, muttering a flustered *I'll shower in the morning.*

Hannibal merely smiles at him blandly, and reaches up to wipe away a little of the toothpaste Will had left clinging to his cheek. Unsurprised when a blotchy-red Will finishes his wash-up quickly and flees from the room.

By the time Hannibal finishes in the bathroom and returns downstairs, Will has pulled on a t-shirt and boxers, turned off all but one of the lights, and gotten into bed.

He shuffles a little awkwardly when he notices Hannibal's presence again - even God in heaven must be tormented by the sound of those squeaky bedsprings -, clutching at the covers he has picked up from the floor and so very aware of his own surroundings. The thoughts tripping so clearly across his expression, wondering what Hannibal must think of them. Him. "If you don't want to sleep here -"

"Here," Hannibal says firmly as he pulls on a pair of pyjama trousers from his go-bag, repeating his earlier words before Will can talk himself into paranoia, "will do."

Hannibal's back won't thank him for a night in Will's little camp bed but Will's growing belief in him should outweigh the temporary damage to Hannibal's spine. The dogs, at least, are already snoring away in their *own* beds - even Winston.

The camp bed is warm when Hannibal joins Will in it, heavily scented with sex and body products, their own scents soft and soothing underneath. Each breath is laced with a mixture of musk and mint toothpaste, Hannibal's cologne and the cardamom-spiced wintry woods - but sweet, sweet, *sweet.*

With the blinds down, when Will reaches out to switch off the last light, the darkness of the world around and within Will's little Wolf Trap home is almost absolute. The night presses close and heavy, blanketing Hannibal with the soft sounds of rustling bed linens and dog snores, a humming space heater, and Will, a little but terribly polite distance away across the mattress, breathing just a shade louder and faster than Hannibal in the night.

Hannibal gives the poor boy's heart a few minutes to settle before casually inquiring, "Do *you* want me to sleep elsewhere?"

Startled, Will makes a strangled noise somewhere between a cry, a cough and a distressed chirp, flailing around in the bedsheets - *squeak squeeeak* - until he has rolled over to face Hannibal. "That wasn't what I meant!"

His heart is pounding again, breath a little too fast again, and Hannibal lets his own lips curve into a smile. "Not accustomed to sharing your bed?"

"Not like *this,*" Will blurts out, and then *groans,* his head lifting from his pillow for a moment only to flop down on it again with a tragic *thump.* Hannibal can see him better now, his eyes adjusting to the dark, the moon of Will's skin above the sheets. "You should know. I sweat sometimes. A *lot.*"

Interesting. Hannibal hums. "I was an Emergency Room surgeon, Will. I've had much more disgusting and objectionable things on me before than a beautiful man's *sweat.*"

The night, for a moment, is both silent and flustered.

And then Will reaches out, across the little space between them, his blind hand stretching out to find Hannibal's chest, pressing warm and open over the skin and hair there, over the slow

steady thud of Hannibal's heart.

"Stay," Will entreats him quietly. His fingers are shaking.

"It would be my pleasure," says Hannibal, and covers Will's hand with his own until Will's breaths slow and even out, his touch on Hannibal's body going lax with sleep.

It is pleasant how quickly Hannibal feels sleep stretching out *its* fingers to wrap around him then, and he succumbs - secure in the knowledge, as he allows slumber to pull him down into its depths, that he has Will Graham exactly where he wants him.

Chapter End Notes

Niflette: (from Latin *ne flete*, 'cry no more') A sweet puff pastry tart filled with orange water crème pâtissière, served piping hot and traditionally made for All Saints Day. A specialty from the town of Provins in Seine-et-Marne, legend has it that a baker created niflettes to console a little girl who was crying at her grandmother's grave, and the tarts were thus given out to orphans on All Saint's Day (la Toussaint) as they came out of church. Originally, niflettes were only made for All Saints Day, but can now be found for sale during most of late autumn.

This chapter was - again! - supposed to be *revelations*, but Hannibal talked. Just. So much. Look at all his nefarious plotty plans. Look at them, because they're all useless in the face of Will Graham and the hyper-intelligent dumbass hasn't worked that out yet.

Hannibal's outfit is almost a direct copy of this look from the BOSS Hugo Boss A/W 2013/2014 campaign. Plaid was (unfortunately) incredibly fashionable in 2013. Hannibal's S1 looks were cutting edge fashion.

More food:
Cassoulet of confit duck, lamb, pork, and Toulouse sausages
Cranberry cider smash
Torta alla Monferrina
No-bake pumpkin spice cookie balls
Chocolate-covered stuffed dates

cocotte

Chapter Summary

Weird dreams are made of peach. Curiosity - and a few terrible assumptions - severely displease the cat. (Hannibal certainly displays a great deal of cattiness anyway.)

Chapter Notes

As promised (however belatedly): hark! A cluebat!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Summer in Baton Rouge, many years ago, somewhere between a memory and a dream. Will sits on his grandmother's doorstep, five years old - six? Seven? The step is wide either side of his small skinny body, the stone of it burning his backside through his shorts with the reflected heat of the sun. Will's cheeks and nose are already itching with the feel of too-hot peeling skin - and he's forgotten his hat again, which means he'll have *more* aloe slopped on him after his bedtime bath, slimy and cool.

Will spends his summer nights at his grandmother's in bed with the sheets sticking everywhere to him, starfishing limbs made clammy by sweat and aloe out on the borrowed mattress and trying not to feel so much like a splayed dead frog. The bedroom window is cracked open just enough to let in a breeze rather than burglars - not that *either* visit -, and the uncaring cicadas sing all night.

The sun high in the sky, the cicadas prefer to click and whirr their business mostly out of sight. Will doesn't pay the insects much mind when they're not keeping him awake unless he accidentally squashes one, and then he just feels bad. Even at that age - whatever age that is - he knows cicadas spend most of their lives underground, changing bit by little bit in the darkness. When their transformation is complete, the imagos have their time to fly in the fresh air, the wind and the sun - and die, sometimes, swiftly and accidentally, with a particular wet *crunch* under the sole of a little boy's shoe. It's a bit ignominious.

Will doesn't much care for scraping dead bugs off his shoes either, but his grandmother will twist his ear if he treks pieces of slimy dead cicada across her kitchen floor. (Again.) No pie for him tonight if he does it again, though the smell of baked pecan and burnt sugar floats out of the house behind Will, an entreaty to mind his manners. And his feet.

Will has a peach in his hands: round and fat, straight from Georgia. Its sweet yellow flesh bursts like sunshine in his mouth, sticky, cloudy juice sliding over Will's wrists and down his

arm with each of his big happy bites. He's hungry - it's been an hour or so since lunchtime and he's a growing boy - so the fruit disappears pretty quick, leaving nothing behind but the dripping stone in Will's palm. Still trailing wet pink tendrils of flesh, like the tubes of a torn-out heart.

Even after licking the juice off his arm and hands, Will's still so hungry he could eat it whole.

The pit is hard and hurts Will's teeth, but there's enough juice left clinging to it Will pops it into his mouth to suck clean - clean*er* -, spitting it out into his hands again only when the tendrils have all gone and the stone's hard ridges scratch too much at his gums. Inside… inside, there should be kernels, softer things to fill up the cavern of Will's belly - but they're poison, anyone with common sense can tell you that. Eat too many peach kernels without the bad stuff cooked out and you'll keel over dead. Even a few kernels on Will's hungry stomach might make him sick.

A cicada flies overhead with a whirr of wings, a quick little shadow that'll do nothing for Will's sunburn. For the ache building up in his belly, in the bright hot space behind his eyes. He's hungry, and dinner is *hours* away.

Will cracks open the peach stone with a strength he shouldn't have, bare-handed.

Instead of kernels, thick, hot, wet red blood drips out, puddling in his lap, sliding down Will's legs. Will laps at the trails of it over his wrists, swallowing down what he can though most of it smears pink with the peach juice already on his chin, sunshine and iron-copper, but the blood just keeps on coming. What had been a dribble turns into a steady pour, more liquid than should be possible to be held in such a little stone. Pit. Heart.

The heart's broken halves throb hard in Will's hands, beating in time with the endless gush of blood. It's everywhere, the tide of red spreading out around Will into a crimson sea. Will holds the heart that empties itself into the rising depths like a bloody child Aquarius, and smiles as the rising blood laps his ankles, his calves, his knees, his waist. Frothing and sloshing around his ribs, first, then his shoulders.

Will holds the peach heart above his head to keep the falling stream above the surface of his blood sea. Blood gushes down over his face, a torrent now, hotter than the sun, sticking to his hair and his eyelashes and filling up all his aches and his hunger with an endless stinging gush of red.

Will opens his mouth when the blood reaches his chin, letting the hot liquid slide over his tongue and down into his stomach, his lungs, and all of him. He swallows and swallows, and it swallows him whole.

The morning of All Souls creeps in with a cold bright frankness, its bald light lacking the filter of exhaust fumes and chimney stacks that Hannibal is accustomed to waking up to in Baltimore. Rather than the slam of front doors and car doors, the rev of engines and the creak of mailboxes, the dawn world around Wolf Trap is a place of rustling leaves and grass - and the sleepy snuffles of seven dogs.

Two of the motley seven are awake, lifting their heads from rest on their paws when they see Hannibal rising from their master's bed, their tails thumping hopefully on the floor. Harley and Jack-the-dog, as Will had introduced them the night before, look to Hannibal eagerly, the other five still sleeping in their beds around them.

"Hush," Hannibal tells the two as he passes them, quiet and firm though very much doubting either will listen to him without a piece of sausage in his hands.

As if to spite his cynicism and to suggest Hannibal should have more faith in their master's training methods - or their own memories of Hannibal, provider of sausage, as a man worth listening to - both dogs subside at once, settling down into their beds again. Their tails are still wagging like metronomes but at a slower (and, more importantly, *quieter*) pace than before; bearable, Hannibal thinks, feeling the canine eyes tracking his movements all the way to the stairs, as it is much less likely to wake up everyone else in the room. Hannibal has no desire to have all of the pack clamouring around his legs so early in the day, begging for attention when his attention currently has the opportunity to be better spent elsewhere, and Will -

Will is more useful to Hannibal asleep at the moment. The dawn light doesn't seem to have disturbed him at all, Will instinctively maintaining the equilibrium of his slumber by burrowing down further into his bedsheets. His body has half-curled up around its core to make up for the heat that had been lost when Hannibal had left the bed, the gleam of morning shining on his curls as they tumble over the arm Will has folded beneath his head. Breath steady and even.

Hannibal relieves himself in the bathroom upstairs before beginning to explore.

Will has four rooms upstairs in total: the bathroom and three additional. One is what had obviously been intended as the master bedroom, now made-up with fresh bed linens as Will's spare bedroom. Another room, beside it, has been entirely given over to cardboard boxes and general assorted junk. The third smells faintly of sweet smoky musk - Will's arousal - even through a closed door, enough that Hannibal half-expects to find Will's nest on the other side. Even borrowing one of Will's towels from the bathroom to cover the handle before he turns it, careful not to leave the tell-tale oils from his touch on the entrance to an omega's *highly* intimate space.

Hannibal lives to be disappointed; there isn't a nest on the other side of the door, nor is there any sign of a traditional nesting cavity built into the walls or large furniture. The general scents of Will and his slick *do* increase with the door open, but so, too, does the smell of disuse and dust. The scents in the air are older, stale from lack of stirring for a little while, and the room itself is empty save for a few more cardboard boxes, an old wardrobe, a mirror, and several battered trunks.

Nest or no nest, Hannibal keeps the towel wrapped over his hands when he investigates the trunks. Even if the room hasn't been used for a while, the kind of scent Will has left inside of it screams *intimacies,* and omegas are incredibly sensitive to changes of scents in their most private spaces, on their most intimate belongings.

The trunks contain blankets, cushions and pillows - nesting materials, and obviously used. They've all been washed and laundered because they smell of laundry detergent and cheap fabric softener, but the scent of *Will,* pleasured, sweating, and aroused, has been soaked into the soft materials too far to be entirely washed away. Some of the blankets look a little threadbare with age and the stuffing in a great many of the cushions and pillows has gone flat - depressing, to Hannibal's eye, but at least everything has been washed, ironed and folded before being put away. Sans dog hair.

The wardrobe yields boxes of winterwear and, more interestingly, a few handfuls of hanging garment bags. Unzipping the latter reveals a cream-and-black herringbone overcoat (a warm wool blend), several suits in different colours and states of wear (none tailored), a simple long-sleeved drop waist dress in black linen (funeral wear - one cuff still holds specks of lily pollen, and the fabric itself the faint whiff of embalming fluid), and a floor-length sheath dress in a deep midnight blue crepe that almost looks black in the shade.

The style of the last had been popular for women and omegas in the spring/summer a few years ago: deliberately flowing, extra fabric pinned to the skirt to billow behind as a train. This one in particular is fairly modest and plain for its type, long-sleeved and not too dramatic with its plunging neckline, for all it will still show off its wearer's throat incredibly, and any contrasting necklace or omega collar beside it. The thought of it on Will is to already be imagining sliding fingertips down the long swan line of Will's white throat, the colours of the crepe bringing out the darkest blue-blacks in Will's eyes as the fabric billows around him like a storm.

Hannibal tucks and hangs all the clothes away again, his thoughts as busy as his fingers as they tug out any creases he might have made. Leaving no trace of his presence behind.

Will Graham is not a frivolous man. He doesn't buy many things or spend very lavishly, but he buys what he knows he needs, in a quality good enough, with the care he shows it, to last. His choices are practical rather than aesthetic, and his personal indulgences seem woefully sparse. Pressing too much luxury on Will all at once, too quickly, too soon, would simply make him baulk.

As Hannibal had observed the night before, downstairs only reveals more of the same - and not just the neat stacks of identical folded shirts, socks and underwear in Will's drawers. The inside of Will's house is an extension of the outside, all wooden pieces and natural tones, wide, wide windows to allow a smooth passage of light and movement between. The furniture is mismatched and shows different stages of wear, suggesting that the individual pieces had either been bought or otherwise acquired at different points with little thought spent on uniting the arrangement into a cohesive aesthetic whole, but everything is clean and clearly organised - though not by any immediately obvious system.

All of the dogs are awake now, two of the littlest prancing near the front door. Hannibal opens the door to let them out before they start whining, and six of the seven-strong pack

immediately dash out into the cold of the morning, plunging into the frost-rimed fields with gleeful abandon.

The seventh, and only remaining, dog is, of course, Winston, the brindled mutt watching Hannibal suspiciously with his dark dog eyes. His paws firmly planted between Hannibal at the door and Will, still sleeping, in the bed.

Hannibal watches Winston genially in return, still holding the front door open with one hand. The air dancing into the room on the morning breeze is full of all the interesting smells of outdoors, a lure as bright as the sight of Winston's siblings already out amongst them, the dogs bounding through the grass. Relieving themselves after the long hours indoors.

Outside, somewhere nearby, a sparrow bursts into a full-throated song. Another bird, startled by the dogs, takes wing from the grass.

Winston's paws shift tentatively on the floorboards, nails clicking, his eyes flicking momentarily but with deep longing to all the interesting things he could be looking at and sniffing at outside.

"I'm not going to hold the door open for much longer," Hannibal informs the dog, and holds his gaze steady with Winston's as he tilts his head meaningfully at all the bucolic wonders of the outdoors. Hannibal will only indulge any dog for so long, and Winston's time is rapidly running out as the cool breeze chills Hannibal's bare upper half, prickling his flesh all over and pebbling his nipples into small aching peaks. "Will you be going outside now or not at all?"

Winston caves and goes, convinced at last by either the call of the wild or the urgency of his bladder. Hannibal doesn't care which it is in the end, closing the door quietly behind the dog and retrieving his sweater from the night before to try and warm himself up again.

The bright glow of glass and metal catches the corner of Hannibal's eye as he finishes pulling the sweater over his head; a collection of different coloured bottles of various shapes and sizes on one windowsill catching some of the sunlight that sneaks in under that window's shade. They're all alcohol, nearly all of them opened: whiskies, mostly (or swill masquerading as whiskey), but also liqueurs, vermouth, vodka and rum. By them sits a table for tying fishing flies, its surface brighter than the bottles with its brilliant threads and feathers, the sharp glinting hooks that peek out from finished lures. Poison and death, addiction and hobby.

Fishing rods rest in a rack against the wall.

The main draw of the room - beside the bed and Will upon it - is an upright piano. Hannibal cannot try its keys without waking Will, but the way the top of the instrument seems to have been turned into a shelf for a random assortment of objects implies the piano might not see much - musical - use. Stacks of books seem to have migrated there since they have no clear home on the already full bookshelves either side of Will's fireplace beside the piano, haphazard towers of thought.

There are books everywhere, in fact, as varied and eclectic in topics as the mind of the man who owns them. Will has everything from Carl Jung and Ernest Jones to *Benet's Reader's Encyclopaedia* and *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of English Literature.* Books on American law, psychiatry and psychology sit beside the *Complete Seafood* cookbook and *World of Motorcycles. The Bacchae* and *The Oresteia* share space, weight and themes with Arden's *Complete Works* of Shakespeare, whilst biographies and autobiographies of doctors and writers jostle for room amongst the private letters of those like Ezra Pound, Rupert Brooke, and James Strachey. A great deal of late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature, fiction and non-fiction both, intersperses it all - and poetry, a great deal of poetry, Romantic and Modernist with a few others beside.

Will's copy of Robert Frost's collected poems hasn't been put back properly on its shelf, its spine misaligned with the ones on either side of it. Pulling the book out to thumb through, Hannibal is unsurprised to find fresh traces of Will's scent on the page for *October,* the invisible marks of his fingerprints.

And the *less* invisible marks of Will's hand: notes penned in the book's margins, words underlined. A few pages dogeared at the corners, the spine folded into creases from use.

Hannibal has to close his eyes at the devastation. The appreciation.

Beguile us in the way you know.

Will, it seems, is an avid reader, and engages with what he loves. As tactile with his mind as he is with his hands, feeling his way around words as pieces in an ever-evolving puzzle, around books as a lover discovers the body of the beloved before them, as a cartographer reaches for the heights to map out new terrain. A man of voracious appetites, the hunger for *understanding* chief of all. Burning for it.

One of the Wills in Hannibal's mind's eye is forever the firebird on Hannibal's office's mezzanine, his touch on Hannibal's shelves laying claim to the knowledge there, the whole space around him, as his own.

There: that hunger to understand. There: that hunger to *be* understood.

A man may not be judged wholly by his bookshelves but there is still so much of Will to be found amongst his books. Pieces of those things that haunt Will's soul, picked up as Hannibal's fingertips trace over the spines of Will's books as tenderly as if they were those of living creatures. Words and lives trembling under his touch and begging to be consumed.

Hannibal replaces the Frost: this time, aligned with its kin. Moving a half-chewed stick - likely wrestled away from a dog determined to get splinters in their mouth - on the same shelf away from the books entirely, to the mantel above the fireplace.

In deference to the season - or the sheer sentimentality everyone who has not seen Will with his dogs seems surprised the omega possesses -, there is already a small white pumpkin sitting on the mantelpiece. The gourd is carefully wedged out of harm's way amidst a clock, a clutter of letters, small dog statuettes and other bric-à-brac, and is very likely the same one that Hannibal had caught such a brief glimpse of on Will's desk in Quantico some days ago.

A kind, if not overly talented, hand has drawn Will's likeness on the side of it in pen, bright colours and simplified features picking out the impossible draw of Will's blue eyes, the pink bloom of Will's mouth when it rests naturally in contemplation of serious things.

Too likely to decry the endeavour as an act of narcissism, Will is not the sort to have drawn an image of himself and then displayed it in his place of work, no matter the time of year or choice of canvas. The pumpkin, therefore, must have been a gift - but from whom? Someone at Quantico, for Will to have had it on his desk, but that still leaves the field too vast to pluck a single culprit from. Could it have been a student? A colleague? A teacher, an agent - a friend, Will's alpha lover?

Hannibal lets his eyes narrow on the pumpkin, contemplating what might be done with it now that Halloween is over. The gourd looks to be of the Baby Boo - or a closely related - variety: more aesthetic than culinary in use. Depending on how long Will has had the pumpkin, Hannibal *might* be able to make some passable sweet breakfast muffins out of it - or, at the very least, find a good fire to burn the thing on after giving its dried seeds to the birds. Better than it accidentally propagating itself in the compost heap.

Another time. Later.

Inspection complete, Hannibal steps through the maze of dog beds to return to the much larger sofa bed and the side of the fascinating man still sleeping in it.

Will had not sweat as much during the night as he had said he might, but he *had* been something of a fitful bedpartner. A light sleeper anyway, Hannibal had been woken three times by Will's restless twisting on the mattress beside him, the omega utterly lost in deep sleep each time.

Hannibal had watched him curiously at each waking, wondering what dreams painted the inside of Will's eyelids to turn the stubborn omega into this hot damp animal in the darkness, his scent spiked with something rich and sweet-savoury like arousal, sharp and sour like fear. His hand, flung out once, turning into a covetous clutch of claws on Hannibal's chest.

Each time, Will's turbulent dreams had eventually subsided, fading out of existence with the same sporadic twitches that had heralded their rising in the first place. Will's face and body had both slackened out as his brain slipped into another, more peaceful, segment of its sleep cycle, and, more thoughtful each time, Hannibal had returned to his own slumber.

Will is still now, untroubled by his missing dogs, the cold air, or the ever-brightening morning. Even through the shades, the light in his front room now is the cold white harshness preferred by operating theatres and museums for their marble antiquities, that cold glow meant for glaring gods and bleached bones. It washes the warm colours out of Will quite starkly, leaving behind only his dark hair, his shadows, and the rivers of blue veins that show through his translucent skin.

Laying almost on his front, his body tipped one way as his face is turned on the pillow of his arms towards Hannibal on the other, Will reminds Hannibal, once more, of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus,* the sculpture of the deity who myth sometimes claims was the first male omega. The original divine beauty that inspired nature to create more of the same.

Bathed now in that more austere light, his body still carrying the tension of his dreams, Will too is a genesis of inspiration. Hannibal could make endless studies of Will as Hermaphroditus, drawing Will as the god is portrayed in the sculpture in the Louvre, in Paris, and the Uffizi, in Florence, both of which Hannibal had sketched many times in his youth. Would be pleased to sketch again, finding all the perfect-imperfect minute differences between each form.

The Louvre's version of the sleeping god, is, of course, the most renowned, paired with Bernini's peculiar buttoned mattress beneath it. A master hand had undeniably sculpted the curves of the languid nude, his raised foot, the tender thinness of his closed eyes, and the pouting mouth almost parted with a drowsy murmur. Lines defined, twisted form and dreams preserved for the ages.

Will, perhaps, might prefer the Florentine portrayal, the sculpture in the *Sala dell'Ermafrodito* with its incarnadine walls. Less finely, but perhaps more lovingly, made, the Uffizi's *Hermaphroditus* has a sweeter rest: his body is more relaxed into the feline tiger skin upon which he has made his bed, and no sheets have twisted themselves in his restlessness about his legs. The Uffizi's *Hermaphroditus* has a resting pout more like Will's bowed lips, an expression almost begging for a thumb to rest upon its swell, another mouth, a waking kiss.

One more willingly accepted by Will than Salmacis' forceful kiss and transformative wish had been by Hermaphroditus in the myths.

Will does not seem like a man accustomed to being kissed sweetly awake. Will does not seem like he has many overnight guests who *could* kiss him awake - or many guests at all, judging by the scents that linger around his home. Hannibal has only truly scented Will here, in this house: Will, and his dogs, and, near the kitchen, the very faint and fading traces of Alana Bloom's violet perfume.

Will could do with a pleasant awakening. Hannibal could do with taking the opportunity to press himself further into the tender places of Will's mind, bringing the omega pleasure when Will's thoughts are still drifting in the liminal space between sleep and true consciousness. The seeds of the day can be planted in such fertile soil, the natural optimism of the mind - buoyed by healing sleep - so often full of good intentions right before waking, right before reality and its many requirements intrude.

To that end, Hannibal stretches out on the bed beside Will again, the barrier of the sheets now between their bodies. There are not so many inches between them like this but a great deal of difference in their warmth; Hannibal, exposed to the cold outside air, feels chilled beside the heat Will is throwing off, the omega running hot to begin with and then kept warm by his covers.

That warmth seeps through Hannibal's body when Will shifts instinctively on the mattress towards him, turning into the bracket of Hannibal's body and making a soft, incoherent noise of pleasure in his sleep when Hannibal's palm cups his nape. Like this, a sweet thing. Trusting, as Will is not when he is awake.

Will's smallest curls are almost blood-warm at the base of his skull, so close to his neck, and Hannibal's fingers slide through them fondly as he ducks his head, pressing his mouth once more to the open invite of Will's throat. The prickle of morning stubble there is a reminder to Hannibal that he also needs to shave at some point; he has a spare razor in his go-bag if Will can spare him some shaving foam, no matter how dreadful that foam might be. Hannibal has likely shaved with much worse than with whatever keeps Will's skin so smooth beneath the shadow on his jaw - although perhaps Will simply has skin as stubborn as he himself is, youthful flesh determined to defy whatever abrasive products Will might slap on it.

Thankfully, Will's awful chemical scent-blockers have been rubbed off by sweat, sleep and his bedsheets, leaving behind the lovely spiced smoke-and-pine air of Will's natural scent. Musk and something acrid, likely the leftover traces of semen and sweat. Will's scent is stronger than usual now, before Will has woken and had a chance to shower - strangely strong, a deep, sweet-edged *richness* to it that makes saliva pool in Hannibal's mouth, turning his teeth lightly against the tendons of Will's throat as he burrows down, down, to breathe deep against the source at Will's nearest scent gland.

Hannibal breathes in winter against his teeth, the taste-smell of Will heavy on his tongue, against the roof of his mouth. Snared in the branching net of Hannibal's lungs. Hannibal could swallow deep breaths of Will this way as an appetiser - and *would*, had the taste of Will's ozone not fired straight to his brain, a cold jolt of terrible realisation that presents itself in fragmented parts before assembling into their greater whole.

Hannibal knows Will scent now, he's sure; he could find Will blind, all the places Will has been. Hannibal has explored Will's house now, this intimate space where the omega has lived his life in every state of health and emotion, Hannibal tucking away each scent-memory he found in the room in his mind dedicated to Will Graham. There, Hannibal would have said he has created an almost exhaustive olfactory portfolio of the man in front of him: *by scent, this is Will Graham.*

Up close, Will Graham does not smell like the Will Graham that has dwelt for so long in his Wolf Trap home. There is an acrid pungency against Will's scent gland that is not just the regular mixture of his dried sweat and slick/semen with body odour, a counterbalance to an almost musty sweetness that has developed the cardamom notes of Will's normal scent. All of it very rich, very deep, a change deep at Will's core. His body chemistry.

His hormones.

Building levels of progesterone and oestrogen. Spiked levels of relaxin and hCG.

Pregnancy hormones, at a level suitable for a fairly healthy pregnant male omega in the first month or so of his first trimester. Levels of prolactin, the hormone which stimulates the enlargement of mammary glands and the production of breast milk, tend to rise more slowly and at a much later point in pregnancies for male omegas than for other genders capable of becoming pregnant, but all the other tell-tale hormones are there transforming Will from the inside out, their scents singing from under his skin.

Will Graham is pregnant.

Everyone with a working nose will be able to smell it on Will around the three-to-four month mark, as Will moves into the second trimester of his pregnancy. *If* Will moves into the second trimester of his pregnancy.

Hannibal has a finer nose, and Hannibal can smell it *now.*

His lip curls - is *this* why Will had worn such strong scent blockers? Hiding the spawn of one lover that was swelling his belly whilst taking Hannibal to his bed?

The pregnancy… the embryo isn't *Hannibal's;* Will hadn't been in heat when Hannibal had mounted the omega in his own Mount Vernon home, and an omega's fertility drops dramatically outside of that period. Not to mention that every time they have had penetrative sex, Hannibal and Will have used condoms.

Clearly Will's *alpha* paramour hadn't faced the same restrictions, despite Will keeping a box of condoms in their size handy at his bedside.

Hannibal can feel himself snarling against Will's throat, and has to pull himself back to resist the impulse to rip into the tender scented flesh before him with his teeth. How could Will Graham, so guarded of his own self he rarely makes *eye contact* with another human, allow another to mark him so indelibly? Someone who cannot hold a candle to his brilliance, in all likelihood, who will dull his edge and propagate that travesty with their spawn? The thought is almost appalling, and the *actuality* under Hannibal's nose -

Hannibal has to recalculate many of his plans now, recalibrate. Will, of course, is oblivious to it, sighing in his sleep as though he is not a lamb curled up against the body of a wolf. Turning his face and nuzzling into the scent of Hannibal now on his pillow.

Trace oils of Will's scent are still smeared over Hannibal's chin. Preoccupied, Hannibal accidentally tastes them when his tongue flicks out to wet his lips, and barely has the time to grimace before he realises what he has done and knows Will's hormones will be at work on *him* now as well. More than Will's scent alone has done.

Even before the average person will detect the pregnancy in their scent, a pregnant person's pheromones promote feelings of calmness and protectiveness in others: a biological defence mechanism meant to protect the mother and the foetus growing in their womb by reducing aggression nearby and towards them. Omegas, who have fewer fertile periods annually than beta women, naturally produce stronger pheromones when pregnant on average than beta women - though the studies are still debating whether that is because omegas tend to possess stronger, more pheromone-laden scents in the first place, or whether omega biology is more defensive of its pregnancies due to their more infrequent nature in comparison to betas.

Those who are closest to the pregnant person - omega, beta, other, it does not matter - are always the most strongly affected by their pheromones, and *ingesting* them is a guaranteed way to induce a calmness in Hannibal that he currently does not *want* to feel, a hand angrily throwing rocks into the deep still pool of his thoughts and being denied its ripples.

Of course, even ruling out accidental injury, should someone be intent on harm, calming pheromones alone will not protect a pregnant person. Such strong base impulses are not

easily overridden; like hypnosis, an individual cannot be coerced by such methods to do - or not do - anything they would not have done beforehand. But should an individual be open to persuasion…

Hannibal sits up again, frowning. Does Will even *know* he's pregnant? Based upon his fierce defence and tender solicitousness of the comatose Abigail Hobbs, Hannibal has been operating under the probable assumption that Will harbours exploitable parental feelings towards the girl. It would be reasonable to expect that Will would extend the same level of care he has shown to Abigail to a child - or, at the moment, more the *idea* of a child - being carried in his own womb - and yet Will had failed to decline the highly alcoholic drink Hannibal had brought with him to accompany their dinner the night before. Or the coffee, in the hospital. And has likely been imbibing alcohol and caffeine both in quantities even the average layman will tell you a pregnant person should avoid, judging by the scent of coffee on Will's clothes at times, the way Will still has his bottles of alcohol out in the open even though they should not be seeing much use as he lives alone and rarely entertains.

If Will doesn't know about the secret he himself carries, it is very probable its sire remains unaware as well. If both are so then Hannibal has *time:* windows of opportunity that will last until Will learns of the pregnancy, until Will knows Hannibal knows about the pregnancy, and until the biological father of the embryo is informed.

Should all four parties concerned still be around at that point. Until then -

Hannibal leans over the man still sleeping, ingenuous, beside him, and fastidiously tucks away a curl that had been dangling over Will's eye behind the omega's ear. Considering.

Will should wake soon, even, once more, without a kiss.

Hannibal might as well attend to breakfast.

Will wakes with the phantom taste of peaches and iron at the back of his mouth. The sour, burning taste of bile immediately follows and Will has to swallow several times before his eyes have even properly blinked open, his belly swirling with nausea, his tongue and throat dry and hot and awful.

Thankfully, the urge to vomit subsides after a few minutes, but Will still sits up a little gingerly in his bed in case it makes a return. When he has the brain-space left to care about it, regarding the cool, empty expanse of the mattress beside him with some worry. The empty room beyond it.

Hannibal has clearly been up for a while. Will hopes the dogs hadn't disturbed him. Hell, Will hopes *Will* hadn't disturbed him, because, knowing Will's luck, he'd probably thrashed

about in his sleep and accidentally given Hannibal a black eye or something. Sex and a shiner: *that* would be a night for the doctor to remember.

The sound of someone busy in his kitchen gets Will up onto his feet, the smell of garlic, butter and eggs in a pan coaxing a hopeful rumble from his stomach. Will lifts his window shades before going to investigate, and his heart is put immediately at rest upon seeing his dogs lolloping around in the fields outside, clearly in good spirits. So, by process of elimination...

“Hey.” Will hovers on the threshold to his own kitchen, a little intimidated by the sight of Hannibal Lecter stirring the source of all the wonderful smells at Will’s stove with almost dangerous competence.

How a man clad in nothing but a sweater and pyjama pants, standing in Will’s outdated little farmhouse kitchen and armed with nothing but Will’s woefully lacking utensils and cookware, manages to look like a professional hard at work in a high-stakes environment is beyond Will’s powers of comprehension pre-coffee, though his animal sense of self-preservation has kicked in enough to warn him to not get in Hannibal’s way. If the doctor can produce something that smells like *food* out of the contents of Will’s fridge and cupboards, who knows what *else* Hannibal might be able to do with a flipper?

“Will, good morning.” Hannibal glances up from whatever he’s handling on the stove, his tone and expression as professionally cordial as though he were simply welcoming Will into his office for another off-the-books conversation. Christ. “You saved me the task of coming through to wake you. Breakfast is almost ready.”

Will would *kill* for Hannibal’s level of casual detachment. “Oh?” he asks instead, beginning a tentative shuffle towards his coffeemaker now that their greetings have broken through the invisible fortress Hannibal had made of the kitchen. He needs something to wash his mouth out with, take away the taste of sick and sleep.

“A small caprese frittata with arugula, though I’m having some trouble deciding on its accompaniment. Perhaps a green salad, or some pan-fried vegetables. Which would you prefer?”

Hannibal’s hands are busy whilst he talks, artfully arranging sliced somethings from a chopping board beside him into the hissing skillet in front of him. By the coffeemaker, Will still can’t see what Hannibal is making, but he can see Hannibal has made use of the sad little bag of salad that Will had bought at the supermarket earlier in the week and tossed in his fridge under the vague pretence he'd eat it at some point. (The bag has got to be the source of the arugula, because Will has never once knowingly stocked his fridge with arugula by itself.)

Will frowns down at the coffee scoop in his hand, his thoughts far from the dark ground beans he’d been measuring out for his machine. Both of Hannibal’s side dish suggestions sound great to him - because of course they do; the only sides Will usually has the time for at breakfast are coffee and more coffee -, but Will still has a fridge full of food from last night. Hannibal had made them a feast to consume yesterday; he doesn’t need to do it again this morning.

None of this finds its way out of Will's mouth. His mind might be a quick, subtle thing, but a lifetime of practice has taught his tongue to use his thoughts bluntly before common sense and courtesy can catch up.

"Hannibal. Cake."

Fortunately, Hannibal can keep up. "...I suppose there is a great deal of cake left from last night, yes."

"Those date things too," Will adds, and takes Hannibal's gracious nod - and sigh - for acquiescence.

A domestic lull falls naturally between them. Will finishes setting up his coffeemaker and goes to start slicing them up some of Hannibal's toffee apple sponge, whilst Hannibal busies himself fiddling with Will's broiler, shifting the skillet from the stovetop to sear under the broiler's heat before going to wash his hands, the cutting board and the knives.

"Do you prefer a sweet breakfast?" Hannibal inquires when Will brings the plates of cake over to the bench beside him, a little less formal now with his meal plans thrown off track. Anyone overhearing them might actually believe they're acquainted.

For all his sighing, Hannibal doesn't *look* terribly thwarted. He looks pretty soft now, actually, in his sweater and sleeping pants, spoons and flippers out of his hands. It's annoyingly attractive, *again,* and Will doesn't trust it whatsoever.

Shouldn't fucking have gotten this idiocy out of Will's system? Rendered him immune? Will can *smell* Hannibal now Hannibal's cologne has worn off, his beta scent deeper than most. Warm skin heats the scent of something that could be oakmoss and ambergris, a high prickling note of another *something* - salt? Spice? Sweetness? - that all but *begs* Will to identify it by putting his tongue to Hannibal's throat and tasting it from the source.

Will drags his gaze away from Hannibal's neckline, looking around his kitchen at *anything* else. "I'll eat whatever's put in front of me," he says a little self-deprecatingly, leaning his hip against the counter and passing Hannibal a towel to dry off with. (It's bad enough Hannibal has *cooked* in Will's kitchen; God forbid Hannibal drip water about the place and then fuss until someone wipes the floorboards.) "Most mornings, that's coffee and toast. Don't really have the time to be picky, not when I've got to sort out the dogs and then get on the road to Quantico."

Assuming Will remembers to eat breakfast at all.

"...Speaking of," Will continues, leaping in with the dogs as his lifeline before Hannibal can start on whatever *breakfast is the most important meal of the day* related speech Will can currently see hovering on the tip of his tongue, "they'll be wanting their breakfast by now. Will they get in your way if I let them in in a few minutes?"

Hannibal finishes drying his hands, folding the used towel in half and in half again. Corners perfectly matched, hospital-room neat. Old habits die hard. "I'll be finished here presently."

Will digs his homemade dog food out of the fridge, the large plastic tub looking like a lost child amidst the much fancier offerings Will had wedged in there beside it the night before: the leftovers of the feast. Despite its contents being nothing Will wouldn't eat himself - his dogs get good cuts of meat used in their food, and better ingredients than Will often uses for his *own* meals -, the lack of *flair* to the dish renders the plastic tub now in Will's arms a black sheep in the kitchen, leading Will to rather dolefully reflect on how easy it is for his things and him to be pushed out of the places he'd thought were their own.

Hannibal quickly makes every kitchen he cooks in *his* own, and Will and Will's homemade dog food exist in this one by courtesy of Hannibal's gracious permission only.

Testing the limits of that graciousness, Will decides to mix in some store-bought kibble with the homemade food as he portions out the food into his dogs' bowls, crouched down on the floor. The smell quells the appetite somewhat; the kibble, unlike the mix Will made himself, *pongs*.

Victory, spotted out of the corner of Will's eye, is the sight of Hannibal Lecter wrinkling his prim little nose.

"The dogs didn't bother you during the night, did they?" Will asks solicitously, taking his time with his task.

"Not at all," Hannibal politely demurs, wiping the look of distaste from his face before Will glances up at him again, "I had a very restful sleep."

"Good." Will hauls himself up to his feet again, returning both the bag of kibble and the plastic tub to their rightful places. Dropping the spoon he'd used to mix up the food in the sink to handle later. "That's good."

Hannibal has returned to the broiler. "I hope you don't mind that I let them outside without waking you first. I rose to answer a call of nature, and returned to find them begging to be able to do the same."

"You expect me to complain that you looked after my dogs *and* let me sleep? And then started on a cooked breakfast?" Will can't help but grin, his cheeks stretching with heat against the cold air. For all of Hannibal's irritating habits, the ones he carefully chooses to present to the world as faults are (mostly) *not* the ones Will has picked up on. "A man could get used to that kind of abuse."

"Careful, Will." Bent over and busy with the skillet again, Hannibal's tone has shifted into something deep and warm, an amused richness that sends a small flood of heat down into Will's belly. A shot of something that burns wonderfully all the way down - much like the sight of Hannibal bent over, ass and long legs taken as one whole stunning view. "You might give someone a terrible impression about me."

"Ah yes, the devastating implication that there's actually a *person* under all those three-piece suits you like to wear," Will quips, hating himself just a little for how much he wants to suggest to his freshly-minted friend-with-benefits that Will ought to be *impressed upon*.

Before being immediately distracted by the contents of the skillet Hannibal has finally retrieved from under the broiler. “Is that a *pizza?* ”

The wind goes out of Hannibal’s pompous sails again. “A caprese-style frittata,” he says a little stiffly, clearly wounded at having his offering compared to something as plebeian as *pizza*. “Eggs, garlic, arugula, sliced tomatoes and mozzarella -”

“A pizza omelette.”

Hannibal’s smile has an edge fine enough to make Will bleed. “Perhaps you’d like to feed your dogs, Will, whilst I serve.”

Will takes the suggestion as the dismissal it is, pointing out the cupboard where he keeps his plates before heading for his front door.

Winston is already waiting on the porch. The dog rushes to press himself up against Will’s legs as soon as the door is opened, his tail sweeping in delight behind him as Will bends down to rub behind his ears.

“Not used to having strangers in the house, huh boy?”

The rest of the pack comes racing in at Will’s whistle, patiently waiting to get their paws wiped free of the frosty morning dew before Will allows them into the house for their breakfast.

Hannibal has already taken all the food to the table so Will heads back into the kitchen after his pack for their coffee, taking through the milk and sugar for Hannibal to measure out his own. Will’s own cup is sweeter than usual that morning, the grit of sugar against his tongue a counterpoint to the wonderful warm eggy-garlic-cheese aroma of their food.

“I can’t believe you made this in my kitchen,” Will says, slicing into his portion of the frittata with a fork. The way the mozzarella *oozes* under his tines should be illegal, and Will has to restrain himself from just shoving the whole thing in his mouth. “I thought my stove was allergic to the gourmet.”

Elbows on the table as he nurses his coffee, Hannibal shows his little sliver of a smile again. Very pleased with himself again, a cat complimented for bringing home the prize of a rare dead bird. “I’ve cooked in more challenging environments before, but, if we must point fingers amongst your appliances, I would say your fridge and its contents showed the more resistant properties.”

Will laughs around a mouthful of eggs, lifting his hand to cover his lips to avoid spraying his half-masticated breakfast out over the tabletop. “So sorry my grocery shop doesn’t account for guests with *taste.*” Or guests at all really. “As long as I can feed myself and the dogs…” Will shrugs.

Though his lips seem to automatically mirror Will’s good humour with a smile, more pensive thoughts slip behind the dark of Hannibal’s eyes. Will glimpses only the edges of them before Hannibal has tucked them away from his sight, a serenely cordial facsimile of encouragement

smoothly taking their place. “The first step in the development of taste is to be willing to credit your own opinion.”

“What if it’s a bad opinion?” Will needles, curious about whatever it is he had provoked in Hannibal’s mind.

“Experience evolves our preferences, and our preferences are borne of comparison.” Hannibal’s eyes refuse to divulge their secrets, though the sharpening of his focus across the table between them suggests he has noticed Will is searching for them. The eye contact sparks like electricity down Will’s back, and Will shivers with it when he breaks the connection to look away. “One cannot truly say they prefer *this* to *that* if they have not received at least some exposure to both.”

“So you would argue ignorance is, itself, a bad opinion?”

Hannibal seems to ponder the question, swallowing his own mouthful of frittata before allowing, “*Wilful* ignorance, perhaps. Choosing not to have an opinion on a topic or issue you are aware of is, by virtue of that choice, *some* kind of opinion on that issue, but, without that choice, it is difficult to discern the preferences of someone who does not *know* what they do not know.”

That way lies madness.

Will consoles himself by stabbing a slice of tomato on his plate. “The more you know, the more you can be held accountable for.” So sayeth the prosecution anyway.

“Just so,” Hannibal agrees, and lifts his cup of coffee again to tip it towards Will in a laconic toast. “Happy is the fool.”

Chapter End Notes

DANGER, WILL ~~ROBINSON~~ GRAHAM.
The cluebat should have been swung both harder and with more deadly precision.

Cocotte: (saucepan/little hen) 1, a casserole dish, stewpot or slow cooker. 2, a casserole. 3, a hen. 4, as *ma cocotte,* a term of affection arising from the prior entry, equivalent to the English sweetie/honey/darling/love. 5, a pejorative term for a woman: a tart/promiscuous woman/prostitute.

The *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* in the Louvre, Paris (featuring the mattress sculpted by Bernini), and the Uffizi, Florence.

Caprese frittata with arugula

amer

Chapter Summary

Abigail Hobbs wakes from her coma.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All Saints hook-up with Hannibal notwithstanding, November seems determined to bring Will as much trouble as it possibly can. Another round of bureaucratic shit-flinging masquerading as politely-worded discourse takes place in his academic email inbox, the end result being, after a few days, that an amended version of Will's Hogan's Alley scenario is finally approved for a trial run sometime in the new year.

Will hardly has the time to revel in his triumph: he picks up a bout of food poisoning from a shitty bowl of Quantico cafeteria chilli and has to take a few days off sick. His stomach stays sensitive for *days* afterwards, objecting stridently to Will consuming anything more exotic than bowls of chicken soup, soft white rice and lemon-baked fish. After a portion of Hannibal's leftover cassoulet goes to waste, half-digested in a pool of vomit in Will's kitchen sink, Will finds himself petulantly eating oatmeal with honey and puréed apples for dinner one night, trying not to feel like a fussy baby stuck on plain soft foods but unable to stop himself from blanching at the thought of eating anything more adventurous. The cassoulet had tasted a great deal less nice coming up than it had going down, and the memory is less easily scoured from Will's mind than the taste of it is from his tongue with mild minty toothpaste.

Despite his stomach remaining delicate, Will returns to work - and pays for his stubbornness/diligence by being found barfing up his guts in the bathroom by one of Jack's gofers just after lunch. Jack's news is as dreadful as the mess Will has just heaved up into the toilet but is far less easily flushed away: the FBI leak has been at it again.

Ms. Freddie Lounds of *Tattlecrime*.com fame, unbothered by the pressure the FBI has already exerted on her for revealing confidential information in the middle of the Stammets case and jeopardising an innocent, has somehow found out that the person who put ten bullet holes into the Minnesota Shrike is the same individual who landed the Mushroom Gardener in hospital with two broken legs - and that that individual is one Will Graham, professor at the FBI Academy at Quantico and Special Agent. Lounds, swiftly and determinedly concluding that Will is a lying, state-sanctioned psychopath with a violent vigilante streak, has run a less than flattering exposé of Will on her blog, raking up some ancient photographs from Will's days in the NOPD to accompany her drivel.

TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE

“I’ve been called a psychopath before,” Will muses after he’s hauled himself out of the bathroom and across Quantico to Jack’s office. He’s having to squint, somewhat wearily, at the article on Jack’s screen as he leans on Jack’s desk beside the other man: Jack really keeps the brightness setting on it too high, and Will’s head is already pounding, “and by far better writers, but the *harridan* line is new.”

“‘Harridan’?” Jack queries, peering at his computer again around Will’s forearm. He’d clearly just skimmed the article before immediately sending for Will, so Will clicks and highlights some of Lounds’ spectacular introduction to Will’s ‘demented mind’: *these profilers should be likened to harridans reading a cup of spent tealeaves - passing off their active imaginations as incisive fact.* “Son-of-a-bitch.”

“That’s about the only thing she *hasn’t* called me. I mean - ‘Jack Crawford’s crime gimp’ ? Who even uses the term *crime gimp*?” Will sighs and surrenders Jack’s computer to him again, crossing around to the other side of the alpha’s desk to grab a seat there. Lifts a hand to rub at the ache between his brows.

Will knows he should be furious, but at the moment he just feels too damn *tired* for this. He’s sick of feeling sick, wrung out from his latest trip to the bathroom and now somehow both nauseous *and* hungry. “She’s getting this stuff from damn near the horse’s mouth somehow, Jack. She’s got facts you kept from the press, our working conjectures. And - ‘active imagination’? Those are my words.”

“She won’t give up her sources,” Jack says, managing the frustration Will is too tired to feel. “Cited journalistic integrity when we tried her.”

“She’s got all the integrity of a bottom-feeder,” Will mutters, and tries not to grimace too noticeably when the patchouli-pepper notes in Jack’s scent puff up with the alpha’s rising annoyance. Leans back in his seat, letting the stretch work out a kink in his back. “Long as you can still milk a cow, you don’t send it to the butcher.”

“We’ll shut her down,” Jack promises him.

That won’t go well. “Can’t arrest her for writing an article, Jack.”

“Could slap her with libel.”

So Will can have his reputation legally ‘redeemed’ but still *actually* ground into the mud in the public consciousness some more? The damage has already been done.

“And give her *more* attention? Not to mention that the leak’s still leaking in all the time it takes for the case to get to court. No,” Will ponders aloud, lifting his head again and staring slightly to the left of Jack’s right temple, “we’re better off ignoring her. Keep schtum, and she’ll eventually realise there’s no big story for her.”

Jack considers the suggestion, his chair creaking under him as he leans back to match Will. “And the leak?”

“Plug it,” says Will. “Or strongly encourage it to plug itself.”

Meeting concluded, Will shuffles off to choke down a cup of shitty coffee and a snickers from the nearest vending machine before his next class. A few more students than usual float hopefully by his desk after the lecture has finished, all trepidation and tragic eyes, but they disperse after Will ignores them all for four solid minutes and then pointedly reminds the stragglers of his office hours.

Home and his dogs are a refuge after the day Will has had - until they are not, Will's dreams that night haunted by endless fields of dying, mouldering girls with Abigail Hobbs' face and slashed throats streaming red into the loam. Mushrooms bloom between their clasped fingers, white caps sprout as bouquets from their eyes, and their heads all turn to watch Will as he walks amongst them, their mouths moving as one to whisper accusations Will has heard since his childhood: *psychopath, violent,* liar.

Will wakes slick with sweat, and has to towel himself dry before he lets the dogs out for their morning romp lest he catches a chill on top of his- food poisoning? Stomach flu? Whatever it is, it's *lingering.*

Alana Bloom is on Will's doorstep again, her smile of greeting for Will's dogs dimming only slightly when she catches sight of Will standing in his doorway: his hair still damp and ruffled from sleep, his t-shirt still dark in patches from his sweat.

"Good morning!"

"...We really must stop meeting like this," Will manages to reply, his voice still rough from sleep. (This time, at least, he knows his boxers - almost - *definitely* do not have holes in them.) "It's becoming a bit of a habit."

"Thought it took three to make a pattern," Alana teases him, neatly side-stepping around Will's pack to make her way up onto his porch beside him. She waves two paper bags at him meaningfully, for a moment leaning in close enough the forward sweep of her hair sends a delicious waft of violets and flowery shampoo over Will.

"Strike two," Will murmurs, turning his head just enough to breathe a little more of that sweet scent in, teasing himself when Alana realises how close she has gotten to him and rocks back, prettily flustered, on the heels of her boots. The porch creaks underfoot. "You brought food again. You buttering me up for something?"

Alana recovers quickly, more's the pity. "Bagels. I figured it might be rude to call on someone so early and not bring breakfast." Then, "And Abigail Hobbs woke up."

Of course. Will nods: he should have known. Alana Bloom still only makes her way out to Wolf Trap in the name of therapy. Though it's easy to claim she's doing it for others the benefits exist first and foremost for herself, balancing her internal moral scales with a little early morning chat here and there to ease the pangs of an aching conscience. Presented with an offering of food, to keep it friendly.

"Well," Will says after a considered pause, and tries not to feel too disappointed, "you know how to bury the lede."

Alana considers him right back, her clear eyes probing as they search the minute shifts and twists of Will's expression. Expressions. (What *is* his face doing?) "Do you want me to get you a cup of coffee?"

"No." Will avoids her eyes, letting his gaze flick out past Alana at his drive and the road beyond it, the world all the way back to Baltimore. "I want to go get my coat."

"Let's have a cup of coffee," Alana urges him gently, not-so-subtly herding Will back into his own house when she moves forward. "Or tea. Maybe a nice soothing tea."

Will, caught between Alana and the front door, has nowhere else to go unless he wants to push back against Alana or take a wide circuitous path around her, and both of those options are far too decisive for Will's conflicted impulses at the moment, too tellingly raw to try under Alana's watchful eyes.

So he submits to Alana's gentle herding, inwardly sighing: they're in for a *conversation*.

Will ends up sitting at his table with a plain bagel slathered with peanut butter mixed with a decadent amount of marshmallow fluff, the bread topped with sliced bananas, crushed vanilla wafers, and a drizzle of golden honey. It's the sort of dish young trendy/hipster omegas are always eating during their pre-heats in magazine health guides or in glamorous dramas on TV, building up the calories in a mostly healthy but still hyper-sweet way. A very 'I'm not sure about your preferences, but most omegas would like this, right?' order for Alana to bring.

Alana's blueberry bagel - topped with cream cheese blended with lemon curd, sprinkled with fresh blueberries and grated lemon peel - looks pretty tame in comparison, though it's still a better offering for the table than the slightly stale box of rooibos tea Will had dug out of the back of one of his cupboards for them to drink with their food. There's something a little musty about the brew in their mugs, but it's still drinkable.

They've both finished their bagels and gotten to the bottom half of their mugs when Will's house phone starts ringing, its piercing tones shattering the quiet of the morning. Will lets it go to voicemail, motivated by Alana's quelling look, but the phone only starts ringing again. And again. After the third call, Will's cell phone starts buzzing away on the sideboard instead, Jack Crawford's name flashing on its screen.

For the most part, they both ignore it, though Alana eyebrows are judgmentally lifted as she takes another sip of her tea. Will keeps his own eyes down on the table and his mug, searching for the lost calm of his morning, the quiet space inside of him with his fishing rod in the middle of his stream. Currents all around him, tugging at his calves, at his feet buried in the silt of the bed.

In his mind's eye, Will's bobber dips in the water. In the real world, at the table just off his kitchen, his cell starts buzzing again.

Will gives up, flicking his gaze at Alana until it catches the space between her brows, her attention. *Go on then, Dr. Bloom: make your case.*

Alana only sighs, finishing her tea and setting the mug down on the tabletop with a rather weary *clunk.* (They probably should have had coffee.)

So Will sits back in his seat, stretching out his legs. Inquiring, almost idly, “Is he going to keep calling?”

“Jack wants you to go see her.” Alana is unimpressed.

“And you don’t.”

“Eventually.” Alana can’t look at him all of a sudden, trying to soften her words with a smile that doesn’t make it very far after its conception. Will’s nearly empty mug of lukewarm tea is a warmer expression, ceramic still bleeding faint heat - a paltry comfort - between Will’s palms even as he nods, bitter with chill, to himself.

Alana’s *eventually* will be a long time away.

The calls finally come to an end. The silence is louder now, without the ringing. Echoing. Or maybe that’s Will’s dogs barking as they run around outside; it’s hard to tell.

“Jack thinks Abigail was an accomplice to her father’s crimes. That's his priority. *My* priority...” Alana pauses after stating what they both already know, then delicately suggests, “Could help to take a step back before a step forward.”

Will’s lips twist: he does *not* require sheltering from the big bad world. “Help *who?*”

Alana’s shoulders drop, deliberately encouraging Will to ease off with his wounded aggression. Her words are equally as careful, parsed through the filter of her mind before they pass her lips. “When you see Abigail, and I do think you should see her, I want it to be when it’s best for you and for Abigail. And only then.”

Will takes another mouthful of his tea, ignoring the glance Alana gives the pallor of his expression. The clammy sweat still drying on his brow and in his hair, on his clothing. Unwashed dishes visible through the kitchen doorway, piled up to do by the sink. Bedsheets in sweaty twisted tangles in the living room.

The house probably smells a little sour with whatever sickness Will has caught, though hopefully it’s not really strong enough to get picked up much by Alana’s beta nose.

“You’re still not feeling well?” she asks with tentative concern.

“Some kind of stomach bug, I think. Or leftover food poisoning. Mild.” When Will’s bad dreams don’t exacerbate the symptoms.

Alana’s face finds sympathy. “Best keep an eye on it.”

“No-one else has come down with it,” Will demurs, “so I don’t think I’m infectious.”

“That’s not quite what I meant, but it’s good you’re thinking of others. Remember yourself too, alright?”

“I am dutifully applying hot tea, chicken soup and blankets to my malady, Dr. Bloom,” Will drawls, gesturing with his mug as evidence to his truth. “Even bought myself some of those energy-boosting sports drinks with exciting flavours like ‘blue’ and ‘purple’ the other day.”

“Anything for the electrolytes.” Alana smiles again, taking brief refuge in the shared humour. “...Should I broach the subject of that *Takes One to Know One* article?”

“Ah, yes.” The plunge. Will frowns; he’s beginning to feel like there’s some sort of schedule he hasn’t been told about, the chore of ‘checking on Will’ being passed from person to person. “Did Jack suggest you talk to me?”

Will Graham: may self-implode if left unattended.

“No,” Alana insists, “Jack has nothing to do with it.” She actually sounds a little annoyed about that, as though Jack *should* have suggested she go talk to Will. As though Jack and her talk about Will often enough that, in her opinion, the topic should have come up.

...Maybe it’s an unofficial schedule.

“Tell that to the ‘Jack Crawford’s crime gimp’ label,” Will grouses into his mug.

“I couldn’t believe she wrote that.” Alana’s mouth twitches again. She wants to smile, prefers to be smiling, but doesn’t know enough about Will’s feelings yet to know if that’s a good idea.

Will takes pity on her. “It's kind of hilarious,” he allows, the tangent his kindness. And his avoidance of all the stringy raw wetness he doesn’t want to drag out over his kitchen table, tendrils of soft flesh too close to his hard heart to make getting at them not scrape in the mouth.

Lounds’ article had been catchy - for all it had been poorly written, ethically bankrupt and borderline libellous -, its turns of phrase fun to twist in the mouth because its conjectures were all hot air.

“Certainly creates an image,” Alana agrees, her hands linking together on the tabletop. Hesitating, when Will offers her nothing else: “I don’t need to talk about it if you don’t.”

“I don’t need to talk about it,” Will says. He pauses, letting his gaze drift away from Alana again and out of the window behind her, at the brown-green-grey world outside.

Somewhere out there is Abigail Hobbs, freshly awoken into a world that hates her for her father’s sins. The kitchen table where a friend might have once offered *her* support is now a crime scene, any breakfast bagels brought to it now plated beside the dismembered ghosts of sad, dead, cannibalised girls.

Abigail is alone now. The Shrike’s daughter has left the danger and the safety of the kitchen, of the nest, and the ghost of Garret Jacob Hobbs can only howl at the thought of her devastating freefall. After all, he never taught her how to spread her wings.

“Abigail Hobbs doesn’t have anyone,” says Will.

“You can’t be her everyone,” Alana says. Kindly. Will hates himself a little bit for how much he still wants to reach out with his fingertips and touch the sweet pink firmness of it on her mouth, the lingering blueberry stains where her lips curve inwards towards the seam. “Don’t have to draw a line, but you might want to know where your line is.”

Her kindness sticks in Will’s throat, too close to pity to ever settle in his gut. There are few things worse than pity - and Will would know. A pretty poor boy from the boatyards of Louisiana with a missing mother and a father more liable to take advice from a bottle than his head, it’s something Will has been handed a lot of during his life. (This, too, is a gift.) “Keep my distance?”

Alana too-obviously ponders how to respond to that, tipping back in her seat for a moment to search the ceiling for words. She’s smiling again - rueful, at herself, trying to soften the rising tension between them with self-deprecation. “...When I said what I was going to say in my head, it sounded insulting.” She glances down, and her hair hides her face again. “I’ll find another way to say it.”

Will leans forward, his forearms on the table between the two of them as he calmly, delicately, puts his mug down scant millimetres from Alana’s clasped hands. Lifting her attention from the woodgrain up the line of his arms, back to his face. “Say it the insulting way.”

There’s an honesty in first thoughts, even if it’s the brutal kind. Alana’s nature isn’t cruel for cruelty’s sake, so Will can trust that her first impulses at least have good intentions at their core. Better to cut through to them directly, rather than let the words hover like the Sword of Damocles, unsaid.

“Dogs keep a promise a person can’t.”

Will is hit by that, his lips parting with a rejoinder that won’t come until the hurt has finished sinking in. “I’m not collecting another stray.”

Alana winces for him. “I told you it was insulting.”

“I get it,” Will says. He’d *asked* for it. “I can trust a dog to be a dog, but I can’t trust Abigail Hobbs to be who I think she is.”

Given that inch, Alana decides to go for the mile, still trying to be soothing even as she shifts into *earnest psychiatrist* mode. “The first person Abigail talks to about what happened can’t be anyone who was there when it happened.” Still smarting, Will nods along with her; Alana isn’t saying anything that isn’t standard. “So that means no Dr. Lecter, either.”

“Much less the guy who killed dad.” Will lowers his eyes, watching the tremor of his fingers around the smooth blank curve of his mug. They look like small, pale trembling animals in this light, disconnected from the rest of him. “Jack’s wrong about Abigail.”

Alana nods - not in accord with Will, not yet, but at least accepting what he has to say. Filing away his thoughts to compare and contrast with her own conclusions when she develops them.

It's a position Will can and does respect, though something in him chafes without the immediate agreement of this woman he likes so much. Everyone likes a little validation from the people they like, even him - and *especially* when an innocent girl's life is on the line.

"Let me reach out to her my own way," Alana says.

For now, there's little Will can do except agree with her. Not that he *likes* it, or even thinks Alana's way of doing things will be the *right* way of doing them for Abigail.

"...Don't think they make a breakfast bagel anywhere that's gonna fix all the woes of the traumatised orphan daughter of a serial killer," Will mutters, showing a little more bitterness than he had originally intended, and sits back in his seat again to drain the last of his - now cold - tea.

Coffee really *would* have been better. Might have explained the jitter in Will's limbs, at any rate, the tremble in his fingertips, in his knee as he presses it against the nearest table leg to make it still.

Alana either doesn't want to fight, and/or values their friendship enough to take Will by his words rather than the tone by which he'd delivered them. "Maybe I'll go back to muffins," she teases lightly, and knocks Will's ankle under the table with the tip of her boot when he snorts.

There is a particular kind of public pressure exerted upon agents and officers of the law in America when young, 'good', pretty white omegas are killed, especially when the victims are evidently middle or upper class. Despite the progress made in recent decades towards equality for all genders and dynamics regardless of racial, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, there is still some small kernel of emotion in the American consciousness, stubbornly resisting all attempts to dig it out, that places omegas on a fine pedestal - about equal to privileged children - and *demands* they be protected. Sheltered from all the world's horrors.

How *terrible* it is when an omega is murdered! And how riveting, for the ghoulish. And how *profitable,* for those in the right business.

Photogenic dead omegas sell newspapers. Boost ad revenue. Especially the rich, pretty WASPs with large sad doe eyes that stare soulfully out of their photographs through the screens of TVs, dissected and consumed with the milk and cornflakes at breakfast, red ticker tapes announcing their demise preceding dinners at night.

There are the interviews with bereaved mothers moaning piteously about how they'd never have grandchildren now, choking the words out past the demure strings of pearls around their

necks. Speeches from equally bereaved fathers, torn away from the boardroom and the golf course, weeping stoically that they'd never get to walk their babies down the aisle. Mates and spouses dissolving into smaller and smaller pieces with each camera flash their way, glittering tears and gold and platinum rings about their fingers all they leave behind. Everyone everywhere in this masculine, alpha-dominant society so aghast that their worlds could be ripped asunder, their natural treasure, *the omega,* stolen from the sanctity of their love. The threatened symbol everyone can relate to in the media now. Can grieve for.

All of it, a selfish grief. The kind of grief that sanctimoniously buries the personal dreams and identities of the dead before the bodies, mutely reducing the victims from their own selves to half-invented pieces claimed by others. That prioritises the young, beautiful, rich, neurotypical white victim over the less socially-acceptable ones from other backgrounds.

That whips the public - glutted with their entitlement to private loss - up into a furore that such a treasure should have come to harm, censure and outrage directed at the law enforcement that *should be doing something.*

Amongst other woes, Jack Crawford currently has seven bereaved families pursuing him, desperately wanting to bury whatever remains of their missing omega daughters. The outraged public is behind them, clamouring for justice - and all Jack has for his case is a dead serial killer, that dead killer's dead wife, one house, one hunting cabin, and Abigail Hobbs. Of them all, only Abigail is a useful lead, but, fresh from a visit with the recently-awoken girl, Alana is determined to block the FBI's access to her. Staunch in her defence of Abigail's mental, physical and emotional health, the cheap chemical scent of the air-fresheners lining Port Haven's corridors still heavy on her clothes, the faintest tinge of something more natural about her that could be Abigail's omega scent.

Hannibal had rather hoped to be able to explore a little more of Quantico than Jack Crawford's office this visit, especially since he had rearranged so many of his patients' appointments that day after Jack had called him, but watching Alana Bloom professionally impede Jack's - and the FBI's - investigation out of care for her patient is a sight to behold as well.

She does it so gracefully: manner calm and precise, chin lifted and poised, her ankles neatly crossed in the chair next to Hannibal's on one side of Jack's desk. From Alana's view, she and Hannibal must present a united front.

In times of old, betas had often been left as custodians of land and property whilst the alpha masters and mistresses had been away. Alana's show of steely resolve under pressure today is a very good reminder as to why.

Does Abigail Hobbs even know how fearsome the defender who has sworn to watch over her is?

"You can't *ask* Abigail right now, Jack," Alana insists, still protecting Abigail Hobbs from the FBI's rigorous inquiries. Refusing to be rolled over by Jack's words or Jack's alpha scent, which has spread near-oppressively and flattened itself to all four corners of the office around them.

Never quite fully out of the habit of seeing Hannibal as her mentor, Alana casts a quick glance at him for support before continuing, “We have to create a safe place for her first or you won’t get any answers.”

Jack remains dogged, uncowed by compassion. “I respect your sympathy for her, Dr. Bloom. I hope one day you’ll appreciate my lack of it.”

“You *really* think Abigail Hobbs helped her father kill those girls?”

“It is one possibility that needs to be ruled out,” Jack says, deliberately keeping his tone genial. Reasonable. Maintaining the argument that it’s not *much* he’s asking of Alana here, of Abigail. “If Abigail didn’t help her father, maybe she knows who did.”

The faintest notes of wet *green* leak into Alana’s scent beneath her perfume, like delicate plant stems smeared to a wet pulp against warm skin. Alana is exasperated by Jack’s persistence - but maintains her professionalism, coolly giving Jack her opinion of Abigail Hobbs’ current mental state. Adamantly unbiased in her role as an FBI consultant and psychiatrist both.

In her professional opinion, Alana had found Abigail Hobbs to be ‘surprisingly practical’ about her new circumstances, with a penchant for manipulation, withholding information to gain information. Abigail had demonstrated only enough emotions to Alana and the nurses at Port Haven to prove that she had them, and could, potentially, be hiding something.

Jack, of course, seizes upon Alana’s last pronouncement. Any suspicion cast upon Abigail is a lead for him - and Hannibal can see the valid basis for his claims about the girl, though Abigail’s behaviour could all simply be explained as a response to her trauma. There is no arguing away the fact that Abigail Hobbs has very definitely been exposed to a great deal of trauma - though if and how she has been trauma*tised*, and how that may affect the FBI’s investigation going forward, has yet to be explored in detail.

Or how Abigail’s behaviour will affect *Hannibal’s* plans. Abigail has been useful so far in establishing an emotional connection between Hannibal and Will Graham, their bond built through the joint ruining and saving of her life, but whether that usefulness will continue now the girl is awake has yet to be seen.

Especially now Will is growing another babe in his belly to supplant the role Hannibal had thought to craft for Abigail in his life.

A baby comes into this world, innocent and unmoulded. Potential waiting to *become.* Abigail, though shy of years, is still technically an adult in almost every way; there is still space for her to become, but so much of her sense of self already *is.* And will be unavoidably expressed now that she is awake.

The comatose, much like the dead, can have whatever ideals impressed upon them another soul desires - though there is always the danger that a sleeping victim may one day wake, rise from their beds, and prove all those convictions false.

Even outside of her father's crimes and her potential knowledge of them, Abigail seems *interesting,* at least: Alana reports that Abigail had repeated some of a conversation Alana had had in the girl's presence when Abigail had still been in her coma. Alana is, therefore, now concerned that some of the dark and dreadful words that had undeniably been whispered at Abigail's bedside had seeped into the cradle of Abigail's skull and wreaked further damage there.

What dreams of ruin and rebirth could Hannibal's mycological conversation with Will have planted in Abigail's head? What poison had her ruder nurses dripped into her sleeping ear even before Eldon Stammets had stolen her away to whisper of webs and connections stretched out beneath the earth?

"It is not unheard of for the comatose or anaesthetised to recall word for word conversations that took place in their presence," Hannibal interjects, offering Alana the reassurance she so clearly wants about Abigail. Why else would people so often talk or read aloud to the comatose, if they did not hope or believe the sleeping one could hear them in some way?

"I want Will Graham to talk to her," says Jack, none too subtly seizing the moment of Alana's worried wavering to make his desires plain. Tone carefully nonchalant.

Alana bounces back admirably, crisp as a winter snap. "Jack! Not yet."

"You are *not* Will Graham's psychiatrist, Dr. Bloom. Dr. Lecter is."

"For the record, Agent Crawford," Hannibal demurs, fixing his expression somewhere around politely concerned as cool tension crackles over the battleground of Jack's desk, "I would like to respectfully state that I am not Will Graham's psychiatrist either."

"Closest damn thing to it," Jack says dismissively, as Hannibal had thought he might.

"Nor can I be considered an objective party on this matter. Will and I share a compassion for Abigail Hobbs; we saved her life."

"Then who better to create a safe place for her to answer questions?" asks Jack. He really is determined to pursue this course of his with Abigail as soon as he can.

Alana fumes. She can protest further, of course, and attempt to take this matter over Jack's head - but Jack can and likely *will* put the mess through the courts if he has to to gain access to Abigail. With the public outcry about seven dead omegas it is likely the judge would hand Jack whatever papers he asks for to be able to proceed as he pleases with the federal investigation - so is it better for Alana to stand her ground now in the hopes the judge will back *her* argument to defend her patient, sacrificing all the goodwill between herself and Jack, or should Alana back down now before Jack presents her with a warrant, whilst she is still be able to dictate *some* terms about how Abigail is approached by the FBI?

After a few moments of consideration, grudgingly, Alana backs down - but not before she has it recorded that the FBI interviewing Abigail Hobbs so soon is against her medical advice. *Especially* as the ones Jack is sending to interview Abigail are the two (surviving) men who had shared so closely in her trauma: Will, for his particular insight, and Hannibal for his own

expertise and as emotional and psychological support for both Will and Abigail. Provided Will agrees to go and see Abigail, of course. ASAP.

Haunted as Will's psyche is by the ghost of Abigail's father, Hannibal does not think Will will turn down the opportunity.

Nor does Alana, her lips pinched with both annoyance and dismay. "This could be terrible for *all* of you," she tells Hannibal shortly as the two of them stand in the corridor outside Jack's office, having just hung up with Port Haven to advise them of Abigail's incoming visitors at some point later in the day. "I appreciate that Jack needs answers, but they shouldn't come at the expense of Abigail Hobbs' ability to heal from this. Or Will's. Or yours. Pushing Abigail too hard, too soon, before we even understand how this has already affected her, could *break* her, Hannibal. And you've already admitted that that result would also have serious emotional consequences for yourself and Will."

"Neither Will nor I have any interest in pushing Abigail to the point of breaking, Alana," says Hannibal. "The timing is, perhaps, a little sooner than might normally be advisable -" a concession, Hannibal transferring his briefcase to his other hand so he can reach out to squeeze Alana's shoulder in a commiserate gesture - "but have you considered that meeting Abigail again today might prompt an earlier catharsis than otherwise expected? Draw a definite line under events for everyone involved, providing a stable point from which to begin further growth and healing."

Alana frowns at him, but the tilt of her head suggests that she is, in this, willing to be convinced. "You think this visit could provide you all some closure?"

"Who among us does not crave closure of one kind or another?" Hannibal smiles, encouraging Alana's mood to lighten with a matching lift of the lips. "Besides, I believe it will do our Will a great deal of good to see Abigail awake and healing. As a young woman acting as her own agent in this world, rather than simply a victim he must repeatedly save."

"That could be helpful," Alana agrees, her gaze slanting very pointedly towards Jack's closed office door - behind which the agent in question is finishing up some last-minute affairs -, "if only there weren't still things happening Will might feel it necessary to save Abigail *from*."

The vulgar suspicion of the FBI. And the judgement of the ignorant masses.

"I believe it will do *my* heart some good to see Abigail conscious again, at least," Hannibal offers, and squeezes Alana's shoulder once more before letting the other beta go. It is important for Alana to feel that Hannibal is on her side rather than Jack's even though Hannibal is so willingly going along with Jack's little plan - and that Hannibal is and always shall be on no-one's side but his own. "And, of course, you have my word that we will be as careful with Abigail as we can be."

Alana has classes to teach and other patients to attend to, so, when Jack is finished in his office, Hannibal finds himself walking the increasingly familiar path to Will's lecture hall with Jack Crawford alone. Jack is smug about getting his own way in this, his scent strong with cedar - but even *that* does little to cover up the heavy cloud of hormonal *longing* they

walk into on the same corridor as the lecture hall, primarily alpha pheromones freshly emanated and *ripe* in the air.

Disgusting. Hannibal almost gags when it hits the back of his throat, his measured stride faltering as he pauses to raise his hand to his face, covering his mouth and nose with the cologne-scented space of his wrist and cuffs.

"...Ah," says Jack, when he notices that Hannibal has stopped. Walks back the few steps he'd taken ahead down the corridor, apparently accustomed enough to the cloud of scent in the corridor that he'd been prepared to just grimace and power through it. "Suppose it *is* strongest around this time of day, when the classes are their most busy."

"Including the gender and dynamic sensitivity course?" Hannibal asks somewhat archly.

The pungency of mass alpha desire seems to be coming most strongly from Will's classroom, seeping out into the corridor. Younger, more worked-up alphas drooling disgracefully over an omega.

"Agents and trainee agents have been gently discouraged from neutralising their scents with deadeners in recent years, except for some departments," Jack explains a little awkwardly. Rocks back on his heels a bit, the soles squeaking on the linoleum floor. "Time was, it used to be that *all* agents had to cover up, but they figured that put us at a disadvantage. Learning how to interpret the changing scents of others is a useful law enforcement tool, and your average Joe Schmoe seems to distrust a government man in a suit that smells of nothing at all. Gotta remind folks they're actually talking to people under the suit. Plus, going from neutral training grounds to strong olfactory stimuli in the field was causing freeze-ups, and not a few migraines."

So now the FBI invites strong olfactory stimuli to trigger adverse responses within the hallowed halls of its Academy instead.

The scents are all too mingled and the individuals who possess them too unfamiliar for Hannibal to identify if the alpha or alphas who had left their amorous mark on Will's jacket is/are among them, but the - apparently regular - presence of such a sexually-charged cloud of pheromones following Will around in his supposedly *safe* place of work is appalling regardless. No-one should be subject to such objectification. It's rude; it makes for a threatening, unfriendly environment for Will, other omegas and scent-sensitive betas to work in, and the concentration of lustful alpha pheromones like this has been scientifically proven to encourage showboating and aggression in groups - amongst alphas in particular, though people of all genders and dynamics are usually affected to some degree.

And it *reeks.*

Yes, the FBI is still alpha-dominant. Yes, a certain amount of bodily response from someone towards an individual they are attracted to is largely involuntary, and Will is an attractive omega with a lot of highly-stressed oversexed young alphas around him, but, if the *FBI* cannot manage to train their future agents to better control themselves, there really is no hope for American law enforcement.

“Perhaps the trainees might benefit from further training on learning how to control their own scent-reactions?” Hannibal suggests, his tone mild but his stare on Jack cool over the safety of his sleeve. “If all your omega professors - never mind the general public your agents-in-training are preparing themselves to protect - are subject to *this* kind of sillage from the alpha students, the FBI is one bad day away from a harassment lawsuit.”

Jack winces, but accepts the point. “I’ll make sure it’s on the agenda at the next meeting.”

Will is in the middle of a lecture when they walk into his hall. The room is dim and humid, and a blown-up photograph of Cassie Boyle, impaled upon the antlers of the severed stag head as they’d found her in the field, is projected onto the large screen on the back wall. Will is in front of his desk, leaning back on its surface as he speaks, his gaze sliding across the breathless ranks of students around him without ever catching one of theirs.

Apparently there is no-one - and no alpha - here worth his attention lingering on.

“He is an intelligent psychopath,” Will declaims, resolute as a prophet of old. The lenses of his glasses glint as they catch the projector’s light. “He is a sadist. He will never kill like this again. So how do we catch him?”

“Giving a lecture on Hobbs’ Copycat?” Hannibal inquires of Jack, keeping his voice low to avoid disrupting the lesson. It’s unusual to lecture on an ongoing investigation, as far as Hannibal is aware.

“Need every mind on this we can get,” Jack tells him grimly.

Will pushes himself up from his desk, beginning to pace. Caught in the flow of his address now like a preacher before the altar, Will is magnetic, dramatic, limned in light and filling the hall with his visions. The beauty and truth to be found amidst the horror. “This Copycat is an avid reader of Freddie Lounds and *Tattlecrime.*com. He had intimate knowledge of Garret Jacob Hobbs’ murders, motives, patterns. Enough to recreate them and arguably elevate them. To art.”

Clicking the projector remote, Will cycles through a series of photographs of the Hobbs family as he talks: Abigail and her father on a hunting trip; the body of Louise Hobbs lying on her front doorstep in a pool of her own blood, and Garret Jacob Hobbs, riddled with bullets from Will’s gun, dead in the corner of his own kitchen.

Will sighs, and settles once more on his desk to gaze into space rather than at his class. Perhaps finally noticing his guests still standing at the lecture hall door. “Before Garret Jacob Hobbs murdered his wife and attempted to do the same to his daughter, he received an untraceable call. I believe the as-yet unidentified caller was our Copycat Killer.”

The way Will’s mind works truly is quite magnificent - but his brilliance clearly eats away at him. When the lecture has concluded and the students have (reluctantly, judging by their expressions) filed out, Will looks tired before Jack has even got a word out, his forehead clammy with sweat and his cheeks high with pink like the beginning of a fever. Under the abrasive notes of his aftershave, his scent, up close, is tinged with a faint uncharacteristic sourness that Hannibal would simply put down to changing hormones and likely morning

sickness, but Hannibal can also smell the heat of that flush in Will's face: something that is less like the richness of a developing pregnancy in an omega male and more like sugar burning in a stainless steel pan.

Were they alone, Hannibal would step even closer to scent Will more deeply, perhaps raise his hand to soak up the heat of Will's forehead with his palm - but they aren't. The electric lights reintroduced to the room at the lecture's finish have baldly dispensed with darkness and all its murderous intimacies, and Jack Crawford, beside Hannibal, is impossible to ignore.

"Burning the candle at both ends, Will?" Hannibal asks gently instead, taking a step closer to Will's desk than Jack. Here: here is support, the most kindly and easily reached. "It will not last the night."

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—/ It gives a lovely light!

There is a will-o-wisp glow to Will's blue eyes even behind the protective shield of his glasses - a lure, or a precursor of lightning? All of it is luminous treachery. "I had an earlier start than I was expecting."

"I'm sorry to hear that," says Hannibal solicitously. And he is; Will deserves his rest. "An abrupt awakening can often colour the rest of our day in as poor a light as it started."

"There was definitely some abruptness," Will agrees, his eyes sliding beyond Hannibal to Jack Crawford with the same level of aggrieved wariness that Alana had displayed earlier.

He already knows that Abigail is awake then. And what Jack wants from him, deeply unsurprised when Jack spells it out for him anew.

"I was under the impression that questioning Abigail so soon was explicitly against her doctor's advice," Will says, resting his weight back on one leg as he looks shrewdly between Jack and Hannibal. Then, merely Hannibal. "Never mind *us* being the ones to do it."

"I have seven grieving families who want to bury their daughters," Jack says bluntly. "We need Abigail Hobbs' help with that. Needs must."

"Just because she doesn't have a living family left to petition you doesn't mean Abigail isn't still a victim, Jack." Will's jaw sets mutinously and the heat of his scent flickers with icy ozone, a fascinating hot-cold-hot flash of temper that repeats what Hannibal already knows of him: Will Graham is an omega who defends his ground. "She's only just woken up from a medical coma, and you want us to hound her back into catatonia with half-baked accusations and pictures of dead girls?"

Hannibal clears his throat delicately before Jack can respond to that, assuming from the angry puff of sharp pepper rising in Jack's natural scent that whatever the alpha was about to come out with would only have been incendiary in nature. "It has already been agreed that Miss Hobbs is still in too sensitive a state to be subjected to rigorous interviewing, and of course I have made our promises to Dr. Bloom already to take as much care as is possible with her patient's health."

Will's eyes narrow. "'*Our* promises'?"

Hannibal smiles at him, affecting a little unabashed shrug of comradeliness as he tries to catch Will's gaze with his own: *we both know you will not decline the chance to see Abigail Hobbs.* "I had thought to use today's meeting with Abigail to gain a general understanding of her as a person and her current mental wellbeing, as well as establishing a rapport between us all."

Stubbornly, Will jerks his chin away. (Hannibal wants to bury his teeth in that throat.) "A rapport in which several highly triggering questions may be asked?"

"The state in which we find her will determine how best it is we proceed."

"I trust you both to handle Abigail Hobbs with all the sensitivity and cares she requires," Jack butts in impatiently, rushing through his words like ticking off to-do boxes on a checklist, "just get it *done.* I want your verbal reports this afternoon -" and belatedly remembering that Hannibal doesn't actually work *for* him - "if you're still available then, Dr. Lecter?"

Hannibal nods, but Will's frown at that is a sharp one. "I have another class in -" he looks at his watch - "fifty minutes."

It takes at least an hour and half to get to Port Haven in Baltimore from Quantico. There and back again is three hours, never mind the time it will take to talk to Abigail. They would have to leave *now* to be back in time for this afternoon.

"Cancel it," Jack orders.

Will stiffens, his shoulders going back. Ozone and pepper really do not mix well. "Last minute? No."

Jack's hackles go up as well in response. "*Dr. Lecter* graciously rearranged all his appointments for today."

"And that's very generous of *Dr. Lecter* and *all his appointments.* But I'm sure, as a man with several doctoral degrees under his belt, Dr. Lecter also appreciates the value of a good education. And my students aren't terribly forgiving."

Perhaps they're copying the trait from their professor. Imitation, they say, is the best form of flattery.

"Perhaps you'd permit me to sit in your class until we can depart?" Hannibal inquires of Will - stealing the wind from Jack's sails with his swift, destabilising interjection. Making himself at home by stepping forward to place his briefcase down on Will's desk.

The opportunity to experience one of Will's classes in-person and in its entirety - rather than merely the tail-end of one - is more than worth Jack feeling as though Hannibal cannot be trusted not to undermine him. What better chance will Hannibal have to observe some of the people whose attention Will holds most raptly, as well as being handed a good guideline as to how Will's unique insight might work on a case that Hannibal is already quite familiar with?

"...You can sit at the back," Will says, apparently also caught on the back foot, shoulders dropping in his confusion. "But I was just going to do some grading until then…?"

"Then it's settled," Hannibal says with a nod. Confidence begets confidence; if Hannibal acts as though no-one will argue with him, it is much less likely someone will. "Another hour or so will hardly make much difference to your case at this stage, Jack, but it will allow Will the time to perform his teaching duties and impart the benefit of his expertise about your Copycat."

Jack isn't pleased about the plan, but has the sense to understand that it is the *only* plan he is going to get with Hannibal throwing his support behind Will in this. "I want to see you - *both* - as soon as you get back."

"But of course," Hannibal assures the agent with all due seriousness, and waits until the thwarted Jack has stomped out of the hall before turning back to Will with a smile. Inviting Will to share in his amusement, in one of life's little victories.

Will looks at him very thoughtfully for that, the angle of his eyes glancing curiously off of Hannibal's cheekbone. "You're looking very pleased with yourself for someone who just talked themselves into having a very long, very busy day."

"Oh, my days are usually far longer and busier than this," Hannibal says, pleased when the ozone in the air around them both is softened with a tinge of sweetness again, a suggestion of smoke and pines that welcomes him to lean a little bit closer to Will. "But, since it appears our afternoon is to be fully occupied… perhaps I could entice you into an early lunch?"

Chapter End Notes

Amer: (bitter) bitters. A liquid, often an alcoholic liqueur, flavoured with herbal/botanical matter so the end result has a bitter or bittersweet flavour. Bitters are frequently used to flavour cocktails, or medicinally to encourage appetite, aid digestion and, historically, mask the flavour of antimalarial quinine.

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light! - Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Figs from Thistles: First Fig*

soufflé

Chapter Summary

> Will and Hannibal go to see Abigail at Port Haven. Freddie Lounds finds a lot to write about.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal drives them both to Baltimore because it's just a waste of fuel to take two cars when they're both going to the same destination both ways. They take Hannibal's car because Hannibal offers before Will even thinks to - and because Hannibal drives a fucking midnight blue *Bentley Arnage.* Will is too busy lusting - enviously - over the V8 engine and luxury cream leather interior to put up too much of an argument as he gets steered inside the front passenger seat with Hannibal's hand low on his spine, though he does have to scoff when he reaches for his seatbelt and spots the goddamn *single veneered bottle cooler and cocktail compartment* servicing the rear seats over his shoulder.

True to form, Hannibal seems amused rather than offended when he slides behind the wheel and catches wind of Will's judgement of his obscenely expensive, *custom-ordered,* car. "Have I informed you yet how becomingly you sneer?"

"You can admire it all the way to Baltimore if you keep that up."

Hannibal only hums, starting up the car to take them out of the Academy's parking area. "Tell me, Will, is it the obvious display of wealth that offends you the most, or what I have chosen to spend it on?"

Will turns his head away to frown out the window - all the better to *not* note the absurd amount of buttons the inside of this car has to control all of its expensive gadgets. It's never good business to tell rich people what to do with their money; Will's daddy had drummed *that* lesson into him young.

"You like the finer things in life, Dr. Lecter," he says blandly, neutrally, instead.

"Consider it as stimulating the economy, if that would be a comfort to you," Hannibal says, neither proud nor defensive of his wealth. It simply *exists,* for Hannibal: another useful tool for the doctor to employ.

"Secondary, of course, to stimulating yourself."

"Oh, I stimulate myself frequently, Will. In fact, I recommend it." The playfully salacious tone behind Hannibal's words makes it *perfectly* obvious what he is referring to - as does

Hannibal's minuscule smile, when Will twists his head around again to scowl at the beta, damning himself for the faint rush of heat that goes to his cheeks.

The afternoon light glows in Hannibal's eyes, bringing out all their wicked sparks of red and gold. "One lives but once in the world; why, then, should I deny myself its pleasures when I can afford them?"

"Can't you just say YOLO and be done with it like everyone else?" Will grouses, wanting to be done with the whole topic already. "I don't hate your money, Hannibal."

"But what you deem as unnecessary luxury makes you uncomfortable," Hannibal surmises, and looks away from Will to concentrate on the road. "Did your family have money, Will?"

Ugh. A personal question in payment for passing comment on Hannibal's finances.

"We were poor," Will grits out. "I followed my father from the boatyards in Biloxi and Greenville to lake boats on Erie."

"Always the new boy at school? Always the stranger?"

"Yes."

"Harbouring a half-buried grudge against the rich?"

"Aren't we all," Will asks without asking, deliberately letting the topic drift away from him into the quiet music playing from Hannibal's… radio? Sound system? The sound of altos and tenors singing glorias over low poignant strings fills the car.

Will has wealth now - money, property, job security and royalties, health insurance -, but a flower's petals are dyed by feeding colour to the roots. What is in the soil one grows from affects the thing that is grown.

The rest of the drive off-base and on to Baltimore goes a lot more smoothly. Hannibal asks a few questions about Will's class and general syllabus, and somehow the topic segues into music therapy and people who decide to learn a new instrument as a healing exercise.

"Piano is one of the more popular choices, but I had a patient a few years ago who decided to pick up the cello."

"Genteel Southern omegas don't play the cello," Will says thoughtlessly, and then coughs when Hannibal glances at him with a lifted brow, clearly looking for an explanation. "It's- to play it, you know."

Hannibal lets the silence hang. Expectantly.

"...It's a large instrument," Will tries, but of course Hannibal Lecter, the *bastard,* isn't going to let him get away with just that, a smirk just beginning to curl at the corner of his lips. "You're going to make me say it, aren't you?"

“I have yet to hear a suitable explanation for why playing the cello could garner such disapproval for omegas in the South,” Hannibal says, face and voice playing at guileless like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. “It’s a beautiful, versatile instrument.”

“Yeah,” Will says grimly, and gestures with both hands down to his lap, “and to play it sitting down, you spread your legs for days. Conservative mamas tend to frown on that sort of behaviour from their auctionable offspring.”

Not to mention some pretty slight waifish thing lugging around a giant cello case on their back is a walking target for thieves or worse.

“Were you dissuaded from playing?”

“The cello?” Will shakes his head. “I was no prize filly, Hannibal.” No draconian mother to guard the gates of his chastity either. “Some of my advisors actually *begged* me to properly take up an instrument after I presented, to render me a more suitable applicant for finishing school scholarships.”

Hannibal clears his throat. “...That was a path you once considered going down?” he asks delicately.

Will snorts at him. “They told me, with my pretty face and a finishing school education, I could definitely aspire to mating a football player. Maybe even a *doctor*. It wasn’t worth telling them where they could stick their finishing school education,” Will says, catching Hannibal’s look at him. “Dad had a new job up-state two weeks later; I went to a new school, and eventually I got some career advisors with half a brain and a lot less prejudice.”

“And here you are.”

“And here I am.”

And, not very long later, there they are, pulling into the visitor parking lot of the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility. It’s a short walk away from the main building, mostly obscured from sight by an avenue lined with tall strictly-cut trees - likely to make it more difficult for patients to leave without being noticed, or just to obscure the sight of freedom from those stuck within the facility’s walls. See cars: dream of stealing one to escape the tedium of medical captivity. See artificial rows of tall planted trees: suddenly envisage a world of green growth and healing churned out with machine-like precision, now devoid of comfortable places for squirrels to climb or birds to nest.

Or maybe Will is just being cynical.

The mown lawns and trimmed flower bushes around the main building are so ruthlessly maintained Will winces at the sight of them, haunted by memories of the greenery that had encircled the wealthy clubhouses he and his father had worked for upon occasion in the past. The ‘nature’ is so artificial it hurts.

“Is there a golf course nearby?” he asks Hannibal, with a nod to the lawns beside them.

All of Alana's hopes and plans for Abigail Hobbs (and everyone *else* associated with the Shrike case) have been thwarted by Jack's insistence and Will doesn't know what he feels about that yet, hopeful and nervous and terrified of seeing Abigail all at once, but his opinions on needlessly expensive imposed artificiality in green spaces are making themselves clear to him again. The soldierly trees look like they might uproot themselves just to bludgeon an intruding squirrel to death, and God help any hungry rabbits in the area, because Will can't spot a juicy dandelion anywhere in sight.

What is Port Haven aiming for with this? A bastardisation of an old phrase: neat lawns equal neat minds?

"I'm unsure," says Hannibal, tilting his head like he is actually trying to remember where the nearest course is. Does he even golf? Hannibal is in the right social class to at least *know* people who regularly golf (and his sartorial sense suggests he might share a tailor with them too), "but the landscaping does lend itself to that impression, doesn't it?"

"Landscaping is a generous term for it."

Hannibal laughs, a wicked little twist lingering around his mouth as he steps up to open the facility door for Will to go through first. "If you hear someone shout *fore,* endeavour to duck."

They sign themselves in, and get directed towards the ward desk by the omega wing. Abigail is very likely to still be in her room, but the ward desk should be able to guide Will and Hannibal to her wherever she is in the building.

The ward desk is simple enough to find, though the smile of the omega nurse sitting behind it quickly falters and disappears entirely when Will and Hannibal explain who they are and ask for Abigail's whereabouts.

"Dr. Bloom didn't send word that we were to expect more than one group? Your colleague is already here."

"Did you happen to catch their name?" Hannibal inquires - a great deal more politely than the similar thoughts flashing through Will's mind. "As far as I am aware, Special Agent Graham and myself are the *only* group Dr. Bloom has authorised to speak to Abigail on behalf of the FBI."

Added to that, Will hadn't recognised any of the names above his and Hannibal's on the sign-in sheet at reception. Let alone anyone who fits the nurse's description of Abigail's 'guest': a slight female alpha with very striking red hair.

Two orderlies are summoned to escort Hannibal and Will to Abigail's room whilst the nurse at the ward desk calls down to reception to begin a heated panic-argument about site security.

"You seem to have some idea about the identity of our supposed 'colleague'," Hannibal murmurs from behind Will's shoulder, taking one look at Will's thunderous scowl and making all the right assumptions. An already difficult situation has just been made much more difficult.

“Let’s just say I have a hunch,” Will grits out, remembering Hobbs’ hunting cabin and an intrusive strand of distinctive, curly red hair amidst the antlers. An invasive species looking to line its own nest.

Abigail’s room is at the furthest end of the omega wing, tucked away under the eaves in pale blue like a very washed-out picturesque. The door is ajar when Will arrives there - first -, and a young woman’s tired, wavering voice floats out.

“How did they catch him?” *Abigail.*

“An unstable omega man named Will Graham,” another woman replies. Older. Firmer. And venomous. “Works for the FBI but isn’t FBI.”

Will enters the room, Hannibal a step behind him.

“He catches insane men because he can think like them.”

The floorboards creak slightly underfoot, drawing the attention of the two women in the room: Abigail Hobbs, awake at last and sitting up in bed in her hospital gown, and her *viper* of a guest, perched atop Abigail’s blankets and leaning in close to the girl like a serpent sizing up its next meal.

This woman has to look over her shoulder to see Will and Hannibal as they come in - and the two orderlies waiting outside for her in the hallway. Will watches her face as she realises that her ruse is up and just *who* has overheard her - and sees the exact moment that she makes the brazen-faced decision to *keep talking,* turning back to Abigail: “Because he is insane.”

Freddie - Fredericka - Lounds dresses like an alpha in pre-rut. Beauty used as a tool to entice and intimidate. All edged glamour, Lounds’ features have been carefully lined with make-up, and her flame-red hair is set in tight curls around her sharp, pointed face. Her earrings and metal handbag are gold, flashing in the light, and the leopard print pattern of her skirt is echoed on the cuffs of her black gloves, her petite figure made dramatic by the swirl of her black cape coat.

Freddie Lounds *is* an alpha, though she doesn’t smell like she’s in pre-rut. There’s something Will doesn’t particularly like about her scent anyway, a weird kind of stinging citrus sharpness that floats over a pervasive sweet-sour note of flowery, almost-rotten, banana.

It’s considered pretty impolite to wince at someone’s natural scent, but Will allows himself the impoliteness as he approaches Abigail’s bed. Personal digs are apparently the *plat-du-jour* since Lounds believes it’s acceptable to call someone insane to their face - and after heavily implying as much on the internet.

Abigail’s eyes flicker worriedly between Lounds on her bed and Will and Hannibal, wondering why no-one is saying anything when a declaration like *insanity* is hanging in the air.

“Would you excuse us please?” Will asks Lounds, the calm courtesy of his murmured words utterly failing to mask the threatening *dislike* beneath them.

Lounds slips off the bed like a snake looping its coils, taking a confrontational step away from the bed and towards Will like she means to host a stand-off.

Will walks past her, fixing a forcedly polite smile on his face for Abigail. “I’m Special Agent Will Graham.”

“By special agent,” Lounds says pointedly, looking back at Abigail to continue playing the laughably ridiculous role of ‘voice of truth and reason’ that she has assigned herself though it is only too clear she is utterly piqued at being ignored, “he means not really an agent. He didn’t get past the screening process. Too unstable.”

Unstable again. In case Abigail had missed it the first time.

Abigail’s worry visibly deepens as she absorbs Lounds’ words - and olfactorily, as the bitter-salt scent of a young omega under stress, if not *distress,* floats out into the room around them all. A youngling hunted in the woods.

Everyone stiffens. Will has to dig his nails into his palms to stop himself from bodily reaching for Abigail, and his fangs press sharp against his tongue. Lounds twists towards Abigail -

“I really must insist you leave the room,” Hannibal tells Lounds, coldly crisp as a clear, winter-blue sky. A solid defence at Will’s back, the frost behind Will’s snarl.

Lounds stiffens anew, bristling at being ordered out of the room by a beta. The *offence* flares momentarily in her scent, the citrus smell stronger, orange and pineapple juice spilled and drying stickily on the floor.

Hannibal doesn’t move.

Hannibal doesn’t move, and yet somehow Hannibal manages to *loom*.

Freddie Lounds sizes him up, takes another disgruntled glance at Will, another glance at the two orderlies waiting for her in the hallway outside if she dares to try and kick up a fuss, and reconsiders her life choices.

She turns to Abigail again, fishing out a business card from her handbag. “If you want to talk -”

Will snatches the card from her without saying a word, putting it in his jacket. *That is an end to* that.

Lounds accepts it as a lost cause and departs after one last *do you see what I mean* worried look over her shoulder at Abigail - leaving the echo of her specious words and rotten banana smell behind her.

The door clicks softly shut.

“Abigail,” Will starts. Faltering at the way Abigail is watching him, at the nervous eyes flickering back and forth between Hannibal and him. Will just gets more uncomfortable, and

more grim in his discomfort.

He takes his glasses off for something to focus on rather than the scared, suspicious omega in front of him whose father he had shot dead in front of her, gesturing with one hand to his left. Sensing rather than seeing Hannibal step forward to meet it with a genial smile, filling in the awkward gap. “Abigail, this is Dr. Lecter... Do you remember us?”

Abigail blinks back emotion, her lip, her eyelids trembling. “I remember you,” she says, both wounded and aggressive. Attack is the best form of defence. “You killed my dad.”

A muscle in Will’s jaw spasms, slicing his tongue along the points of his teeth. Will blinks, taking his own shot to the ribcage, and tastes the iron bloom of blood against the roof of his mouth.

Sensitive to the silence, the *feeling* that has swollen Will’s throat shut, Hannibal suggests they all take a walk. Abigail has been in bed for a long time, after all. Her lingering pallor almost has her blending in with the pale wallpaper of her room: she needs some colour in her cheeks.

Hannibal and Will wait in the hallway whilst Abigail dresses herself, and then all three of them make slow, laborious progress - at the suggestion of the (now extremely stressed) nurse on the ward desk - towards the sheltered area of the conservatory that forms part of Port Haven’s garden.

After her life-threatening injury and over a month in a coma, Abigail is weak-legged and frail - almost fawn-like. Will has to take her arm to stop her from stumbling but she does her best to avoid putting too much of her weight on him, either unwilling to seem too weak or not wanting to be too close to *an insane killer.* Afraid to reject his help all the same because she needs it, worried what might happen to her if he withdraws it - and so resigning them both to living with her fear and with the cold feeling that Will is something that must be *endured.*

No seventeen year-old omega likes feeling like a burden. No adult omega likes feeling *burdensome.*

It hurts Will from his heart to the deep cold weight in his belly to see Abigail so fragile, so wan, but he does his best to respect her wishes and only offer her the minimum of support that it takes for him to escort her to the conservatory without further - physical - damage. Hannibal is a solid sympathetic presence guarding their rear, just enough of an emotional tether that Will doesn’t fray apart under the strain.

“...I’m sorry we couldn’t save your mother,” Will murmurs when they finally reach the conservatory. Maybe the plants will soak up his regrets and convert them into something useful, carbon dioxide transformed into oxygen so there is air for them all to breathe again. “We did everything we could, but she was already gone.”

With Louise Hobbs already dead on the doorstep, Will’s bullets had orphaned her daughter. Surely no omega mother would find peace in the afterlife at that?

The brightness of burgeoning tears is obvious on Abigail as the rest of her is so pale, but, when she blinks, none of them spill down her cheeks. “I know. I saw him kill her.”

Abigail's voice wobbles, and her balance with it. Will and Hannibal help Abigail sit down on a nearby bench and hover beside her protectively: the spectre of *him* is not too distant from all their minds.

(Will times his careful inhales to the exhales breathed in the corners of thoughts: *this is life, this is* Will's *life, he knows who he is and this girl is* not *his daughter.* Abigail needs caring for all the same.)

"He was loving right up until the second he wasn't. He kept telling me he was sorry and to just hold still." Abigail goes quiet for a moment, staring into the distance. Somehow, Will doesn't think the girl is studying the manicured lawns outside of the conservatory windows. "He was going to make it all go away."

Will- Absurdly, Will wants to get Abigail a blanket. One of *his* blankets, draping it around her shoulders to offer her more warmth and protection from the world than the thin jacket she is wearing, the scarf Abigail has wrapped around her neck in a poor attempt to hide the large bandage there. Let his scent let the world and *her* know that she isn't alone. That she's protected now, safe in the family nest -

"There was plenty wrong with your father, Abigail," Will says quietly, "but there's nothing wrong with you."

Without fresh blood and antiseptic colouring it, Abigail's natural scent is very woodsy, layered with bark and deep resinous notes, something sweeter dancing atop them like bright things darting about the branches of trees and in the undergrowth. Blackberry bushes as they ripen in the fall.

Some of that scent touches Will's fingertips as he reaches out - the distance between the two of them is too small for Will to stop himself before he has already instinctively started and finished the action -, lifting Abigail's chin and accidentally spearing himself upon the lost wide blueness of her questioning eyes.

Will gives her the greatest gift he can in that moment: not looking away. "You said he was loving. I believe it." Scant comfort poorly offered, but comfort all the same: "That's what you brought out in him."

What Abigail takes from that is horror. "It's not all I brought out in him." Her tears are threatening to fall again.

"Did he tell you about the young women he murdered?" Hannibal asks.

Abigail's hitching breaths go silent in fearful shock, and Will shoots Hannibal a *look.* Annoyed. Betrayed. Abigail is in no fit state to have Jack's suspicions flung at her - and especially not with Hannibal's incisive style of questioning at the helm -, but apparently the 'rapport' between the three of them has now been established sufficiently for Hannibal's standards.

"You don't have to answer that right now, if you don't want to," Will tells Abigail with all the tenderness that is suddenly swelling in him, letting his thumb rub soothingly, once, over the

soft of her cheek before he takes his hand back. His eyes flicking to Hannibal with a great deal more hardness immediately afterwards: if Abigail doesn't want to answer that question - or questions similar to it - right now, they are *not* going to be pushing her.

"But we will have to ask you those questions eventually," Hannibal says, impervious to Will's glower.

Abigail grimaces, clearly evaluating just how much she can handle today - and then seems to understand enough of herself that she realises her answer is *not much more than this.* "I'm going to be messed up, aren't I?"

Will takes a deep breath - how the hell does he even answer that? -, trying to steady himself when Abigail's blinking back of tears becomes more rapid and his own eyes prickle with empathetic moisture in response.

Abigail's voice is more wobble than words. She needs to cry. She isn't allowing herself to cry. "I'm worried about nightmares."

"We'll help you with the nightmares," Hannibal assures her. He sounds like he means it.

Will takes a seat beside Abigail on the bench, his hands clasped together between his spread thighs. He can mind himself a little better sitting like that, rather than doing the far more inappropriate thing of reaching out again and wrapping an arm around Abigail, turning his wrist against her shoulder. Abigail seems willing to take verbal reassurance from Hannibal and him now, but physical contact - never mind scent-marking - initiated from Will's end could still go very badly.

"There's no such thing as getting used to what you experienced," he offers, studying the leaves of a nearby fern when Abigail starts rubbing at her eyes with the heel of one palm. "It bothers me a lot. I worry about nightmares, too."

Abigail shifts to look at him more directly, searching. "Killing somebody, even if you have to do it... it feels that bad?" There's still a film of wetness on her eyelashes, the red skin rimming them.

Will blinks away a matching dampness, and looks away. "It's -"

(*"I liked killing Hobbs."*

Garret Jacob Hobbs had put a knife to the throat of the thing he loved most in the world, after killing a string of others in her likeness to try and avoid getting there.

Garret Jacob Hobbs had *deserved* to die.)

Will makes himself look back at Abigail. And lies. "It's the ugliest thing in the world."

Hannibal says nothing, though Will feels the weight of his gaze on the back of his head.

Abigail considers Will's words for a few moments of silence. Her eyes are still fluttering, itching with the tears Will can tell she doesn't want to start releasing in front of her visitors in

case they never stop, but she manages to straighten her shoulders in her seat. Finding some shaky ground to make a stand in. “I want to go home.”

It isn’t up to either Will or Hannibal if Abigail can return to Minnesota. They do, however, promise to speak to Alana and Jack on her behalf, and Abigail accepts the compromise with a slow sad nod of her head.

They linger in the conservatory for a little longer and talk about shallow, gentler things - how goddamn ugly some of the conservatory plants are, for example - before taking Abigail back to her room, physically and emotionally wrought.

Will is a bit wrung out himself as he and Hannibal leave the building, crinkling his nose up in disgust when he removes Freddie Lounds’ business card from the pocket of his jacket to throw in the trash and realises that the card has gotten that woman’s scent on his clothing. His pocket smells like an alpha’s rotten fruit bowl.

“Does she rub these things against her neck before thrusting them at people?” Will mutters as he tears the card in half and dumps it, rubbing his palms vainly against the sides of his - already tainted - jacket to try and get some of the smell off of them. No luck: the citrus still stinks up Will’s nose.

“Ms. Lounds does have a particularly distinctive scent,” Hannibal states fairly noncommittally, offering Will his pocket handkerchief to wipe his hands with - which Will politely declines. It wouldn’t do anything about the smell already on his jacket and rubbing Hannibal’s scent all over himself, *in front of Hannibal,* feels a little too embarrassing to do outside of the bedroom. “Ylang-ylang as the dominant note, I believe. With yuzu to lend it a sharp quality.”

“...I got rotten banana.”

Hannibal’s smile spreads easy and slow across his face as he keeps pace with Will’s grumpy stride, his amusement catching. “What you smell is most likely the ylang-ylang. However, if your mind has immediately associated the scent with the too-ripe sweetness of floral decay, it is probably safe to assume that yours and Ms. Lounds’ biological compatibility may not be very high.”

“Really? Colour me surprised.”

There’s no easy escape for Will to be found in the parking lot. Freddie Lounds is leaning on the hood of Hannibal’s Bentley, obviously waiting for Hannibal and Will.

The ‘journalist’ clocks the two of them approaching and quickly stands, almost respectfully, her bright smile and carefully lowered shoulders as she moves forward to meet them a deliberate choice to appear as non-aggressive as possible. Bit late for that.

“Special Agent Graham, I never formally introduced myself.” Lounds extends her hand to Will as though first impressions haven’t already been made and *very* publicly aired. *It takes one to know one.* “I’m Freddie Lounds.”

It might have been a courtesy for Lounds to introduce herself to Will *before* splashing photographs of him all over the internet beside her specious judgements of his mental state and suitability to work for the FBI.

Rather than shake Lounds' hand, Will takes his glasses out of his pocket to put them back on again - one more barrier between himself and this irritation. "Trying to salvage this joke from the mouth of madness?"

"Please," Lounds says, adopting a falsely soft, placatory tone that does nothing but put Will's hackles up. *Alphas.* "Let me apologise for my behaviour in there. It was sloppy and misguided." Will makes no effort to hide his quick, bitter smile at Lounds' *gall*, and she quickly takes note of it. "And hurtful."

"Ms. Lounds," Hannibal interjects from just behind Will's shoulder, "now is not the time."

Lounds ignores him, keeping her bright blue eyes on Will. "Look, you and I may have our own reasons for being here, but I also think we both genuinely care about what happens to Abigail Hobbs."

Genuinely care…?

"Feeling a little guilty that you told a serial killer where to find her while she was still in hospital?" Will asks her sharply, disgusted by the obvious appeal to his emotions. He has *nothing* in common with Freddie Lounds; he doesn't *want* to have anything in common with Freddie Lounds. "You told her I was insane."

"I can undo that."

Oh, *can she.* Will can feel his expression twisting into something beyond his control, torn between derision and a furious, incredulous *snarl.* "You help Abigail see me as more than her father's killer and I help you with... online ad sales?"

How *dare* this woman feel like she has the right to even breathe the same air as Abigail Hobbs? The traumatised orphaned girl whose reputation she'd ruined on the internet, and whose *life* she'd endangered with her flagrant carelessness?

"I can undo what I said," Lounds says again, her nice soothing 'now, let's all be friends' voice settling into something far more cool. Will has struck a nerve. "I can also make it a lot worse."

And now she thinks she can threaten him.

"Ms. Lounds," Will says quietly, taking one smooth step closer to her so she can catch every beat of his own cold, crisp enunciation, his lips peeling back from his teeth in the minutest of snarls, "it's not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living."

From behind him, Will hears Hannibal sigh. And Lounds? Lounds *smiles* at him.

...Ah. This is probably going to bite Will in the ass.

It bites Will in the ass.

Hauled into Jack's office to give his report on Abigail as soon as he gets back to Quantico and sandwiched between Alana Bloom and Hannibal - in the least kind of fun way - opposite Jack, Will has to be grudgingly impressed at the speed at which Freddie Lounds can apparently shit out an article and post it on her blog. *Another Shrike In The Nest?* is up a good half hour before Will and Hannibal have made it back from Baltimore: a damning indictment of the FBI's current lack of leads in finding the Shrike's victims' bodies, and highly critical of a particular special agent's involvement in the case.

"'It's not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living'," Jack reads - almost *pleasantly* - from his computer screen. "Do you know what else isn't very smart?" He eyes Hannibal. "You were there with him and you let those words come out of his mouth."

"I trust Will to speak for himself," says Hannibal, which sends a soft rush of something close to affection flooding through Will's chest.

"Evidently, you shouldn't," says Jack.

"I'm just happy the story wasn't about Abigail Hobbs," Alana says, radiating her tiredness of... *everything*. She hadn't wholly approved of letting Will and Hannibal see Abigail so soon; Jack had pushed her, and something had, as she had thought and said it might, gone wrong.

What had gone wrong hadn't been what Alana *thought* would have gone wrong, but Jack's demands do have a habit of playing Russian roulette against the cosmos.

"Well, then it's a victory," Jack says, still as falsely pleasant as before despite the rising peppery notes under the patchouli of his scent.

Will sighs and tries not to wrinkle his nose, letting the unspoken reprimand wash over him. Jack seems to think Will only exists outside of crime scenes to cause him unnecessary paperwork.

Thankfully, Will had thrown him a bone earlier so he doesn't have to keep using Will as his chew-toy. "So Abigail Hobbs wants to go home. Let's take her home."

Alana disagrees immediately, straightening in her seat. "What Abigail wants and what she needs are different things. Taking her out of a controlled environment would be reckless."

"You said she was practical."

“That could just mean she has a dissociative disorder,” Will says quietly, wary of turning Jack’s ire back on himself again. He’s a little tired of people being mad at him today.

“You take her home,” Alana says, “she may experience intense emotions, respond aggressively. Or re-enact some aspect of the traumatic event without even realising it.”

Jack hums, turning to Hannibal again. “Well, where do you weigh in on this, doctor?”

Hannibal, proponent of unorthodox therapies, doesn’t disappoint. “Dr. Bloom is right, but there is a scenario where revisiting the trauma event could help Abigail heal -” Alana sets her face, expression displeased - she and *everyone else in the room* already know whom Jack is going to listen to - “and actually prevent denial.”

In his pleasure at having an argument that agrees with his plans, Jack magnanimously overlooks that he himself had questioned Hannibal’s judgement less than ten minutes ago. “Then we have a difference of opinion, therefore I’m choosing the opinion that best serves my agenda.”

Will just sighs and lowers his eyes.

Alana shakes her head. “Jack, Will killed Abigail’s father to save her life. If she sees Will as her saviour and he doesn’t meet her expectations, she could transfer rage toward her father onto him.”

“He’ll deal with it,” Jack announces, ignoring both Alana’s huff at his easy dismissal and the annoyed omega chirp Will accidentally lets escape from his throat at the fact he’s having that sort of decision made *for* him - *again.* “I need to know if you’re right about the Copycat, Will.”

“We have *no* way of knowing what’s waiting for her when she goes home,” Alana says, torn between upset and irritation.

“You’re more than welcome to accompany your patient to Minnesota, Dr. Bloom,” Jack says graciously. “In fact, we’d appreciate your insight. Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal visibly considers his mental appointment book for a few moments. The poise that he manages to maintain even when being swept along by Jack’s decisions is almost irritating. “It would be easiest to rearrange my appointments were the trip over a weekend,” he allows, before tilting his head inquiringly in Will’s direction. “And Will of course must have Academy obligations during the week?”

How nice to be considered by *someone.* “I *do,*” Will grits out, glowering at Jack’s forehead.

“A weekend visit it is then,” Jack decides, doubling down in the face of the poor atmosphere in the room. Joy: the pepper-patchouli of it all might actually saturate the rotten banana smell on Will’s jacket out of existence. “I’ll get the details for you all ASAP.”

Chapter End Notes

Soufflé: (blown/breathed/inflated/puffed) a light, spongy, egg-based baked dish which originated in early eighteenth century France. It is made with egg yolks and beaten egg whites combined with various other ingredients, and served as a savoury main dish or sweetened as a dessert.

One lives but once in the world. - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Clavigo* (translated from German)

Short chapter this time because the next one's a monster.

mirepoix

Chapter Summary

Abigail returns to Minnesota, Hannibal, Will and Alana in tow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They are all sitting tiredly in the main waiting area of BWI Marshall in the early Saturday morning sunlight, carry-on luggage around their feet, when Abigail notices the airport stores selling off their leftover Halloween candy. Hannibal had rather hoped their little ragtag group might *avoid* the lure of the brightly-coloured half-dismantled displays, all too familiar with the terrible creations masquerading as candy that Will Graham will voluntarily put in his mouth, but it would take a heart far harder than Will's to ignore the stricken look on Abigail's face when she catches sight of the cartoonish Jack o' Lanterns giving way to dancing turkeys and winter baubles.

"Oh," Abigail says, her voice filled with the dawning, depressed realisation that she now has another small disappointment to add to her ever-growing mountain of woes, "I missed Halloween."

It surprises no-one except Abigail that Will departs from their group some fifteen minutes later on the pretence of needing the toilet, returning with an armful of candy. Abigail's eyes light up with cautiously touched pleasure when Will deposits all of it on the empty seat beside her and announces to the group at large that everyone should help themselves - whilst taking the seat on the other side of the candy pile and effectively blocking it off from anyone but himself and Abigail. Hannibal on Will's other side and Alana on Abigail's.

"It tastes better on discount anyway," Will confides to the girl *sotto voce,* digging through the candy pile until he finds some chocolate peanut butter cups - *franken-cups,* according to the neon orange packaging Hannibal spies in his hand - for himself. They seem to be a favourite for him, his scent sweet with cardamom contentment at treats and a good deed done.

On Abigail's other side, Alana tries - unsuccessfully - to hide her growing, sleepy smile behind her hand as Abigail visibly perks up at the sight of some kind of Halloween-themed kit-kats. (They're green and very likely not the green tea flavour favoured in Japan, and Hannibal wishes to investigate no further.) "Did you get any Hershey's?"

"Cookies 'n' creme do you?"

Alana waves her hand so Will tosses her a packet over the girl and candy between them. Shades of the vending machine goods Hannibal had occasionally caught Alana snacking on

in the scant few moments of her downtime during the more stressful days of her residency. “Ooh, *fangs.* Very spooky.”

Hannibal looks up from the screen of his tablet, where he had been perusing the morning news using the airport’s wifi. “...Is that *green*?” he inquires of Will and his *franken-cup,* spotting the thin rim of odd colouring around the base of Will’s peanut butter cup as he unwraps it.

Will gives him a very deliberately wicked look before popping the candy in his mouth. (It *is* green. The travesties Americans will commit against food armed with nothing but an abundance of whimsy, corn oil and - barely - edible dyes in every shade of the imagination will never cease to astound Hannibal.) “Want one?”

Not without alcohol at hand. “Do I truly need to answer that?”

Will’s fangs flash when he grins, boyish with the bulge of the chocolate peanut butter cup melting in his cheek. “Don’t make me threaten you with a good time.”

Hannibal has to confess to some curiosity about whether Will will be able to keep the cheap chocolate down for long. During their lunch earlier in the week, Will had idly mentioned a lingering bout of stomach flu rendering him prone to nausea - likely morning sickness caused by his pregnancy. Whilst the rising progesterone levels in his body might make him crave more fatty calorie-rich foods than usual, those selfsame foods often sit poorly in an unsettled stomach.

“I had a filling breakfast,” Hannibal says, folding his tablet closed for now as his companions all devour their sugary snacks beside him. “I take it you did not?”

“I had to see to the dogs,” Will says somewhat defensively, which means he had likely had nothing more filling than coffee and toast or a cereal bar grabbed as he was heading out of the door.

“I could go grab us all some coffee?” Alana offers, finishing her chocolate in a few neat bites.

She is very striking in her mid-length blue-and-green coat in the mixed early morning and electric light, the heels of her boots clicking professionally on the floor. People passing by their little group turn and look when they see Alana out of the corner of their eyes, made as entranceable as children by sleep-loss and the early hour, the beautiful beta woman as distracting as a butterfly painted in a vibrant wash of watercolours. Resolve drawn beneath in india ink.

Hannibal favours her with a small approving smile. “Tea, perhaps, might be a better option for us all. Herbal preferably. It is far too early in the day to get the caffeine jitters, and there are so few constructive ways to work them off in the confines of an airport.”

Will looks as though he might argue with that for a moment or two, but his gaze slides right to the listening Abigail and he makes the decision to prove a better role model. “...Whatever you think is best, please, Alana.”

Alana nods and departs to investigate whatever beverages the airport's cafés have to provide, the sound of her heels and the sight of her bright coat quickly swallowed by the building crowds trundling past with their suitcases.

"The breakfasts at the hospital aren't very good," Abigail quietly confesses to her half-eaten kit-kat after Alana has gone, apparently unwilling to voice her opinion in front of the older woman. Is she afraid that her words might sadden Alana, or that Alana might take it as a personal attack? "They use the powdered stuff for the orange juice. And the oatmeal is cold and has lumps in it."

Will grimaces sympathetically and hunts through the candy pile until he finds another kit-kat to nudge Abigail's way. The kind of mother who will spoil his child to comfort them.

"It is important that you eat, Abigail," says Hannibal, trying not to frown lest Abigail take it as a criticism and withdraw further into her shell. A listener who reacts poorly to small truths will never be told the larger ones. "Something - no matter how tasteless that something - is better than nothing, but you need to eat to build up your strength again."

Were Abigail a guest at Hannibal's table for breakfast her orange juice would be freshly hand-squeezed, her oatmeal smooth and rich with cream and honey, syrup and brown sugar, cinnamon, apples, dates and raisins. Cups of hot, strong black tea served to her with milk and sugar to wash down a scramble of eggs, sausages and bell peppers, all to put heat and life in her belly and give her the energy she needs to go about her day.

"The lunches are a little better," Abigail says, something a little wary showing in her eyes like she's expecting a(nother?) lecture about her eating habits. Too many well-intentioned nurses shredding her nerves. "I try to make up for it then."

"Then perhaps we might try something to stimulate that appetite of yours. A little more filling than candy."

With the stipulation of weekend travel only, Jack had found their little group the earliest flight out of Baltimore on a Saturday morning that he could. Trying to give them as much time in Minnesota that he could wrangle out of them, factoring in the almost three hour-long flight each way and time spent in travel and security.

Hannibal had assumed that Will would skip eating breakfast and prepared accordingly. If traffic is kind, it takes approximately an hour to drive from Wolf Trap to Baltimore. With an early morning flight ahead of him, Will had likely left his home and his dogs in the grim November darkness: not enough hours in the day allotted for him to sleep, see to his animals, travel *and* prepare a substantial meal. The breaths of one man and seven dogs steaming in the chilly twilight, hungers demanding to be sated in the cold.

To that end, Hannibal had spent his Friday night preparing a light but varied bento for their little group to eat during their travels, something that they all could appreciate and enjoy. Chicken *karaage* and salted edamame beans. Sliced *tamagoyaki* - a rolled omelette, this time left plain - and *shoyu tamago* - soy sauce eggs. Pork *gyoza* whose meat Hannibal had sourced himself, flavouring the filling of the dumplings with ginger and green onion. *Kombu onigiri,* wrapped with *nori;* tomatoes and carrots carved with his humble talent for *kazarigiri* into the

shapes of delicate flowers; roasted pumpkin seeds, and cubes of cheese and cantaloupe. All simple, healthy, filling dishes.

The ginger in the *gyoza* should help ease Will's nausea, whilst the cantaloupe is rich in folates and beta-carotenes - both very important for someone in their first trimester to consume. The retinol in the eggs and cheese should also be good for Will, as well as satisfying some of his body's demands for fat and dairy.

Even if the father of Will's growing babe is a waste of space and air, a child carrying even 50% of Will Graham's DNA should be a great many more times a marvel than the average individual nature's genetic lottery spits out. For now, and unless he requires an alternative decision, Hannibal would see Will's pregnancy continue and flourish as best it can with its currently oblivious mother. A light hand and a delicate midwifery of the unborn.

Abigail gasps agreeably when Hannibal withdraws the bento box from his bag, carefully unwrapping the protective *furoshiki* around it to reveal the box within.

The *furoshiki* is made of cotton, thus making it better suited for travel rather than the finer silk wrappings that Hannibal has used in the past for gifts, a black background with printed red spider lilies at the fore.

The bento box itself had been a gift from Hannibal's aunt Murasaki from her home in Japan: traditionally hand-made and varnished with black lacquer, a pattern of gold falling cherry blossoms scattered across its surface. Art made both implicitly and explicitly acknowledging the transience of life.

Before refinement, the sap of the *urushi* tree, from which the people of Japan have made their beautiful lacquered art for millennia, is poisonous to the touch and emits fumes dangerous to inhale. And yet, through patience and study, and the application of hard work and great skill, comes timeless beauty.

Hannibal finds it fitting to share this gift with his two current companions, as they both, in pieces, remind him of his aunt in some way. When he holds himself with confidence, Will shares strokes of the same brush that still paint Murasaki's dangerous beauty, and the musk and blackberry notes in Abigail's pleasure remind Hannibal of his aunt's peaceful scent of white tea, white musk, blackberries and water lilies. A haunting ghost of gentler yesterdays invited to the meal, food offered before the shrine of history.

Hannibal lays the *furoshiki* as a tablecloth over Will's lap before placing the bento box atop it, beckoning Abigail over to switch seats with himself before Will can complain about being used as a table. The omegas mollify each other: Will wishes for Abigail to find comfort in his presence and is pleased when she draws near, and Abigail finds Will humanised by suffering petty inconveniences.

Now mostly free from the scent of blood and antiseptic, Abigail's own omega scent spills out into the air around her: the wild blackberry of her pleased interest, sweet hay and omega musk, resinous amber and fir. A piquant mid-note has a sharp, almost lemon-like scent to it - a kind of pine, perhaps? Or elemi? Cheap, hospital-issued soaps and shampoos cannot

obscure or contain it, much like Hannibal doubts Port Haven's four walls will hold Abigail Hobbs for long. There is too much of the woods and the wilds in her nature.

Abigail *ooos* again when Hannibal lifts the lid of the bento, and even Will manages an appreciative exhale at the sight of the beautifully arranged food in its many compartments within. Both are a mark of Hannibal's success: a meal should be enjoyed with all five of the senses, and the eyes and nose feast long before the mouth.

Hannibal had also folded several wrapped, travel-safe utensils into the *furoshiki.* He would have liked to have brought along the matching sets of chopsticks he has at home that are painted in the same shade of dark lacquer as the bento box, but such small, precious things are all too easily lost in transit or to the whims of an overly-officious security agent. He therefore had had to make do with a few sets of *waribashi* - disposable chopsticks - and a few flimsy disposable forks.

Both Will and Abigail seem to have no problem with the chopsticks, Abigail snapping hers apart and deftly plucking up a piece of the chicken *karaage* to pop into her mouth. Chew. Swallow.

"Oh my God, you *made* this?"

"I did," Hannibal confirms, pleased to see his culinary efforts appreciated as Abigail takes another piece of chicken. "I take it you like it?"

"It's delicious!" says Abigail immediately - with her hand held over her own mouth, as she hadn't bothered to finish her mouthful before speaking.

Hannibal forgives her the show of poor manners: hunger reduces the importance of etiquette.

Although he has picked up a portion of *tamagoyaki* with his own chopsticks, Will is a little more tentative about diving straight into the food. "Are you sure you don't mind us eating this?" he asks Hannibal.

"I made it for those of us who would be hungry on this trip," Hannibal tells him simply. "If you are hungry, eat. It pleases me to see you both fed."

His reply only seems to increase Will's awkwardness, but at least, after a mumbled *thank you,* Will does begin to eat, ducking his chin down into his chest when Hannibal inclines his head graciously in response. Content to remain silent and allow his two companions to steadily make a dent in the bento.

Will seems to like the *gyoza,* as Hannibal had hoped he might, but the *karaage* is the clear winner for both Abigail and him. The two swiftly realise negotiations are going to be necessary over the amount remaining in the box, and, two dark heads bent together over the food, quickly demarcate their portions from one another via several improvised chopstick gestures and a series of rising and falling *mm*s and *mm-hmm*s.

Passers-by smile at the sight of the two omegas, so alike in appearance, negotiating so ridiculously over their meal. A brief snapshot that must look, to an ignorant outsider, like

mother and daughter bonding, Hannibal the indulgent father or friend sitting nearby. A chair still piled high with Halloween candy in neon-bright packaging. Luggage around all of their feet, marking the territory of family space within.

Occupied with eating - and defending the chicken *karaage* from each other's sneak attacks -, Will and Abigail seem to miss the looks. Hannibal only smiles politely when some of the more fondly indulgent glances from passers-by catch his eye: an acknowledgement, *yes, this is mine.*

Alana returns eventually, as she must. Four paper cups in a cardboard tray in hand. "I got jasmine green tea for all of us; I hope that's okay?"

"More than," says Hannibal, accepting the cup offered to him. It is a choice that will go well with Will and Abigail's meal - albeit not *terribly* well, as the first querying sip Hannibal takes of his drink is appallingly bitter. The tea has been made with water too hot and Alana has left the teabags in the cups, so the leaves have been scalded and the tea has steeped too long. "Thank you for going for them."

Alana smiles, catching sight of the bento box on Will's lap and joking, "The candy seems to have been upgraded in my absence."

"Dr. Lecter made it," Abigail explains between bites of *onigiri,* her chopsticks set aside for now. Flecks of rice and seaweed cling to the corners of her mouth, escaping the absent swipes of her hands.

"Want some?" Will offers when Alana takes their tea over to them, looking for a moment like he might offer Alana the cherry tomato pinched between his two chopsticks as she leans in, the red fruit carved into a rose.

Hannibal leans across the candy pile and gives Alana a fork.

The flight is as tolerable as any three hour domestic flight can be whilst trapped in economy class, breathing recycled air with the rest of loud, pungent, heaving humanity. As Alana takes the seat beside Abigail, Hannibal is left to sit beside Will - after carefully talking Will into taking the window seat in the hopes of monopolising Will's attention for the duration of the flight.

Will had given Hannibal an arch look at his request - and his excuse for that request - for the aisle seat. It cannot be argued that Hannibal has the longer legs of the two of them and would probably be more comfortable sitting by the aisle, but it is a well known fact that the window seat is usually where parents place their children and couples place the omega of the pair. To

better keep an eye on the one enclosed, protecting them from any threats that might be posed by the general public.

Still, Will had taken the window seat without argument.

Apparently too strained and tired to argue, as it turned out. Will had popped two aspirin from a bottle in his pocket and dry-swallowed them, then promptly fallen asleep the moment they had gotten into the air. *Staying* asleep for the entirety of the flight. Utterly thwarting all of Hannibal's hopes for his conscious company and leaving Hannibal to deal with all the noise and smells of the people around them alone.

The rental car is waiting for them when they land, and they drive for food (disappointing café sandwiches) and to the motel Jack had booked them rooms at to drop off their luggage before heading for the Hobbs' house.

Pulling into the driveway, there is no way to escape the eight foot-tall writing graffitied across the garage door. The word *CANNIBALS* glares down at all of them as they exit the car, Abigail's face already wobbling as she takes a few shaky steps forward to better see the desecration of her home.

With such a marker, there is no hiding the knowledge of what lies behind the house's otherwise innocent exterior. Unlike Abigail's throat, no little, gauzy floral scarf is large enough to knot around the scar in the neighbourhood: the doors and curtains of all the nearby houses are firmly shut to the sight, and no-one is out on the streets. A murder house is ugly to the neighbours, like the face of someone who betrayed them. Only outsiders and children stare.

Despite it being made so abundantly clear to her that her house is no longer a place of refuge, some inner core of strength or stubbornness keeps Abigail moving towards her front door. *CANNIBALS* has been emblazoned there as well to match the garage - but Abigail hardly seems to see it, her attention all on the faded, rust-coloured stain on the front step beside her feet.

She ducks her head, the fall of her hair hiding her face from Hannibal's view. "Is this where my mom died?"

"Yes," Will says carefully, the first of them to approach her. Slowly, as though he is afraid Abigail may break down into hysterical crying.

Slowly, as though he can still see Louise Hobbs' ghost lying there, staring blankly up at the sky.

Abigail clasps her hands together in front of her, palms pressed against her abdomen as though to strengthen and stabilise her faltering core. Her fingers still fidget, twitch. Unsettled. "I was sort of expecting a body outline in chalk or tape."

Will steps up onto the front step, standing on the other side of the blood stain from Abigail. Flanking ghosts. "They…" he hesitates, and then decides on simple - brutal - honesty. "They only do that if you're still alive and taken to the hospital before they finish the crime scene."

Abigail trembles finely, all over. “Goodbye, mom,” she says, and then turns to open the front door.

It is not healing, in Hannibal’s opinion, to see one’s childhood home, but it helps one measure whether they are broken, and how and why, assuming they want to know. Beyond the accusations slung against the walls of her home, Abigail’s measurement begins in her kitchen, taking stock of the scrubbed surfaces and numerous hollow spaces where items used to be - now secured away in evidence boxes left here and there. The scents of blood and severe omega distress have been scoured away with deadening products - and with them the smell of a room once lived-in, a space that might be found somewhere some*one* calls a home.

What is left is a clinical theatre, an example for the classroom. A place of death and rebirth. Devastation: ruthlessly organised.

Will follows the girl into the echoing silence, Alana behind him, and Hannibal behind them all. Audience to the show.

“If you ever want to go,” Alana says to Abigail’s back, trying to fill up the quiet with positive support, “you just have to say so and we’ll go.”

Abigail looks back at Alana over her shoulder. Her eyes still red-rimmed. “Go where? The hospital?”

“For now,” says Alana - which clearly does nothing to alleviate the hopelessness pressing down heavily on Abigail’s shoulders.

A follow-up study to the Stanford marshmallow experiment, conducted only the year before, had strongly indicated that children would be much more likely to accept delayed gratification rather than immediate reward *only* in cases where they had faith in the authority figure(s) dispensing the reward.

Abigail, so far betrayed, abandoned by or removed from every meaningful adult in her life, has little faith to spare.

“They turned all the pictures over,” she says, fiddling with some of the magnets on the fridge, the backs of the photographs they hold up on the door.

“Crime scene cleaners will do that,” says Alana. Sealing horror off with mundanities.

Abigail glances left - at the now clean linoleum floor before the windows. The place where she had writhed and bled and almost died beside her father’s staring corpse. “They did a really good job.” Almost nonchalantly: “Is that where all my blood was?”

“Yes,” Will says quietly. Hannibal wishes he could see Will’s face.

Abigail considers the piece of floor she must have seen hundreds of thousands of times before. It must look different to her now, a familiar rusted coin flipped suddenly to the previously unseen other side. And then she looks up directly at Will - pointedly, almost

accusingly, gold flashing in the pale blue of her eyes. “You do this a lot? Go places and think about killing?”

“Too often.”

“So you pretended to be my dad?”

Will steps forward, closer to Abigail, seemingly oblivious to Hannibal’s gaze heavy on his back. This time, for Abigail, he meets hostility with gentleness. “And…” the word is almost a sigh, “people like your dad.”

Some of the sharp edges seem to fade from Abigail’s face. “What did it feel like?” she asks, possessed by that quiet morbid curiosity that affects the suffering, that dreadful indecisive desire to know the truth and know the furthest thing *from* the truth all at the same time. And, perhaps, to not know which is which. “To be him?”

That is something Hannibal would like to know as well. Will can easily explain how others feel, but so rarely delves into how feeling as others feel feels for himself. Carrying the thoughts of others, how does he distinguish his own?

“It’s…” Will hesitates, and Hannibal wonders for a moment if Will is planning to lie again like he had in the conservatory at Port Haven (*it’s the ugliest thing in the world*), denying his own power, denying himself, “like I’m talking to his shadow suspended on dust.”

Abigail’s eyebrows raise. “Even though he’s- he was a beta, and you’re not?”

“That doesn’t matter.”

Abigail nods, her lips pressed together. “No wonder you have nightmares.” She turns her back on Will and braces herself on the nearby sink. Subject closed.

Will looks away as well, the lines of his profile stark *contre-jour*. “The attacks on you and your mother were different. They were desperate. Your dad knew he was out of time.” He swallows, hard, the bob of his throat visible in silhouette. “Somebody told him we were coming.”

Abigail turns around again, her face twisting in understanding, concern. “The man on the phone?”

“It was a blocked call. Did you recognise his voice?”

Hannibal shifts, leaning forward slightly to better catch the expressions that fly across Will’s face. Pondering just how much - or little - the phone may have distorted Hannibal’s voice the day Garret Jacob Hobbs was shot dead -

“I had never heard it before,” says Abigail - and her eyes flick to Hannibal for one brief scalding moment as she shakes her head. Back on Will again immediately after.

Clever girl. And a good liar, bending the truth rather than contradicting it, though not too practised. Awaiting more information before deciding what to do with what she knows.

Hannibal tilts his head slightly, keeping his eyes on Abigail Hobbs now. Recognising her threat.

“Was there anybody new in your father’s life?” Alana asks. “Someone you met or someone he talked about.”

Abigail only stares into space, thinking.

“Abigail,” Will says to draw her out of it, “he may have been contacted by another killer. A copycat.”

“Someone who’s still out there?” Abigail asks him. Worried - or affecting worry quite well as she tries to finish a jigsaw in her mind that she lacks most of the pieces for.

Will gives her one small, sad, and serious nod, and an almost inaudible, “Yeah.”

They move downstairs to the living room, ostensibly to look at recent family photographs to see if there is anyone new in them that Abigail doesn’t recognise that could potentially be the Copycat Killer. They have to find and dig through numerous evidence boxes to do so, the contents of each individual box seeming to be more a matter of chance than any clear attempt at organisation.

Abigail finds a stack of photo frames in one box and kneels down beside it on the floor, Will crouched down beside her as he squints his way through a small pile of paperwork, ageing letters and handwritten notes.

Alana brings another evidence box in and sinks down into a graceful kneel on Abigail’s other side, her bright scarf now hanging loose around her neck, the open sides of her coat hanging either side of her thighs like the drape of a peacock’s tail. Abigail hasn’t shaken apart under the stress of questioning or revisiting her home yet, so it seems the good Dr. Bloom has decided it’s safe for her to settle into her surroundings for the afternoon.

“Can you catch someone’s crazy?” Abigail asks - almost rhetorically, seemingly prompted more by Alana’s movements out of the corner of her eye than any real desire for an answer.

Alana answers her anyway. *“Folie à deux.”*

“What?” Abigail looks up from the photo frame - containing a picture of her parents, smiling - in her hands, distracted and confused by the French.

“It’s a French psychiatric term. ‘Madness shared by two.’”

Will startles when Hannibal walks in front of him, weight falling back on his heels like he’d not expected something suddenly passing into his range of sight. In the faded colours of his jacket, jeans and sweater, he looks like a drab peahen down on the floor beside the two women, a lone bead of sweat sliding down the column of his throat. Perhaps the ghosts have followed him inside, downstairs.

Hannibal sets the box he had been carrying down into place beside Alana’s. “One cannot be delusional if the belief in question is accepted as ordinary by others in that person’s culture or

subculture. Or family."

"My dad didn't seem delusional," Abigail says, still looking at the frame in her hands. Love and hate, relief, regret and disappointment… all these feelings must be swirling about inside of her now, staring down at the photograph of her dead parents. Their frozen faces forever unchanging whilst her own life is now nothing *but* change. "He was a perfectionist."

Will sighs and stands, mutely looking to Hannibal for a moment for support in the conversation to come. "Your dad left hardly any evidence."

Abigail stiffens. "Is that why you let me come home?" She looks between the three others around her, her whole body radiating her sense of betrayal. "To find evidence?"

"It was one of many considerations," Hannibal explains. It will cause him nothing but trouble if Abigail decides to lash out against them all.

Abigail refuses to be so easily placated. "Are we going to re-enact the crime?" She is getting worked up now, pushed up onto her knees, her chest heaving as she whirls on Will. "You be my dad." Alana. "You be my mom." And Hannibal, the blue of her eyes almost luminescent, shot through with fearful, angry omega gold. "And you be the man on the phone."

For a moment, Hannibal unusually has no answer for that, taken aback by this sudden appearance of Abigail Hobbs' temper. Hannibal had assumed the girl to be the sort of omega who retreated in the face of danger rather than swivelling about to snarl at it, strong - but not *fierce* - at her core.

How interesting - and dangerous - the world can be those times Hannibal is proven wrong.

"Abigail -" Will starts.

"Would you prefer to be my mom?" Abigail asks him scornfully, barely sparing him a glance but still visibly blazing through Will's defences all the same. "Or is there no room for her in all the dust in your head?"

Alana speaks up when Will - chastened - subsides. "Abigail, we wanted you to come home to help you leave home behind."

As though *home* can ever truly be left behind.

Hannibal allows himself to pace the length of the room when Abigail breaks her golden-eyed stare with him, contemplating the rustic view he can see from the living room windows. What must have gone through Garret Jacob Hobbs' mind about the fate of his only child whilst walking these same steps?

Hannibal is going to have to do something about Abigail Hobbs and what she - thinks she - knows.

Abigail settles again, though she is clearly still hurt, shaking her head. "You're not going to find any of those girls, you know."

“What makes you say that?” Will ventures carefully.

“He would honour every part of them. He used to make plumbing putty out of elks’ bones.”

Hannibal has the great pleasure of watching understanding dawn on Will’s face: the guts of the Hobbs’ home - and every building Garret Jacob Hobbs may have performed DIY on - are the Shrike’s victims’ mass grave.

Truly, Abigail's father had been the most efficient of recyclers, entering into the old pact of the wilds each time he took a life: take only what you can use, and give thanks for it.

“Whatever bones are left of those girls is probably holding pipes together,” Abigail says, and folds over the photo frame on her lap once more.

As Alana and Will are too visibly trying to control their reactions to that pronouncement, Hannibal asks the pertinent question for their investigation. “Where did he make this putty?”

“At the cabin. I can show you tomorrow.”

The sound of a soft booted tread on the stairs catches Hannibal’s attention before anyone else in the room, and he glances to the relevant living room doorway just as a stranger steps through it behind Will: a young woman, about Abigail’s age as far as Hannibal can immediately tell, dark-haired and smiling hesitantly at the four people in the room before her. Confident enough of her presence in the Hobbs’ home and familiar with its layout, her aesthetic of woolly scarf, jeans and leather jacket blending into the environment.

“Abigail…” Alana says, catching sight of their new companion a heartbeat after Hannibal, “there’s someone here.”

Will turns, and Abigail looks up.

The stranger’s smile brightens. “Hey, Abigail.”

The newcomer is Marissa Schurr: Abigail’s neighbour and best friend for most of her life.

Standing side by side in the Hobbs’ living room, the two girls are a study in similarities and contrasts. Both are female omegas - though Marissa is wearing a patch with the sigma symbol on the sleeve of her jacket, so perhaps she identifies differently -, both brunettes and roughly the same height, the same body type.

To Will’s eye, however, Marissa stands with more confidence, comfortable in a maroon leather jacket and with a thick fluffy scarf around her neck. An omega scent of bleeding cherries to Abigail’s blackberries in the woods. Tanned skin, makeup carefully applied -

Marissa spreads her stance and isn't afraid to take up the space she needs in the world around her, dressed warmly in the colours of fall. There's an occasional thin rim of gold around her eyes when she looks at Will, Alana and Hannibal, her chin raised and stare direct, as if challenging the three adults - *older* adults - present to argue with her for being there.

Abigail… from what Will has seen of her so far, Abigail stands with her head half-bowed most of the time, her neck vulnerable in a show of placatory submission and all her limbs tucked in to make herself small. Not a threat. Not worth eating. *Please leave me alone.* Because her house is still a crime scene being processed, her clothes are clothes that Alana has picked out for her - all the prints and patterns that Alana favours. Abigail is a younger, slightly more rustic Alana clone today with her dark hair, her blue eyes, and her clothes in jewel tones: jeans, teal jacket buttoned closed, peach-pink floral scarf wrapped once, twice, thrice and knotted around the scar on her throat.

(Boarding the plane earlier that morning, the thought had crossed Will's mind that he, Alana and Abigail could've almost passed for a little nuclear family. Biological, if no-one was close enough to scent their dynamics. All brunets, all blue-eyed, all drawn together, traumas and mannerisms mimicked and shared with the group.

The thought should have - could once have? - made Will happy. In many ways, it's an arrangement close to his wistful, absent daydreams. Alana. A family. The dogs.

Swiping a stray piece of rice away from the corner of his mouth with his thumb (a remnant of Hannibal's elaborate boxed brunch), Will had only been able to feel a strange pressing disquiet instead. Sneaking a glance back at Hannibal, guarding the rear of their little group as they found their seats, the odd one out.)

The girls go out into the backyard to talk, away from the oppressive atmosphere inside the house. There are too many shadows inside the Hobbs' home and not enough physical objects left behind to cast them; in the dust motes dancing through stray beams of sunlight Will can track the passage of ghosts.

"Is that a good idea?" Will asks, tilting his head in the direction of the door Abigail and her friend had disappeared through. A little wary of letting Abigail out of all of their sights (as though another Eldon Stammets might be lurking in the woods), but more concerned about what exactly Abigail and Marissa might talk about.

They've been limiting the information Abigail has access to to protect her from all the shit being flung her way in the media, online, but, from what Will knows of teenage omegas - if not girls -, keeping that sort of thing secret from their friends is *not* going to happen.

Now sorting through the photo frames that Abigail had been going through, Alana looks troubled as well. "It's important for Abigail to know she hasn't lost everything. That she still has friends who'll support her, old as well as new."

"*If* her old friends support her," says Will. Alana purses her lips.

They can see Abigail and Marissa now from the living room windows, heading down the slope in the backyard to a stream at the bottom. Teal and maroon out of the corner of their

eyes, like dragonflies, kicking up the fall leaves around them.

There's a knock on the front door upstairs, and Alana leaves to answer it before Will and Hannibal can offer. Her steps are a little brisker than they would usually be - she's worried as well, and doesn't want to hear Will asking the questions out loud that she's silently asking herself.

"Was it something I said?" Will half-asks Hannibal sardonically, pleased at the wry little twist it brings to the other man's mouth. Hannibal, it seems, can handle examining harder truths than Alana can.

"There is a fascinating element of unpredictability inherent in the human nature," Hannibal says, and Will turns to look at him better. Golden dust motes almost make a halo in the air around his head, but the glance of light off Hannibal's cheekbones only highlights the deeper shadows of his skull. "Man can manipulate events to better favour himself, and he can make predictions - sometimes incredibly accurate predictions, in cases such as yours - about how others will respond in certain circumstances, planning for those responses accordingly. But there is still no way to know for certain that any incident involving another human being will play out exactly the way we might wish it to. We as a species even occasionally surprise *ourselves* with how we respond when faced with a new situation."

"It's impossible to account for everything. Least of all," Will surmises absently as he moves closer to the other man, his eyes on Hannibal's shimmering corona of light, "the entire breadth of reactions humanity can conjure in response to the unknown."

"In the end, where people are concerned, there is always a final leap of faith."

"Makes life interesting," Will murmurs - just as two other things happen at once.

1) Alana Bloom returns downstairs to the living room with another woman that Will only briefly catches a glimpse of, because 2) there is the sound of yelling coming from the backyard.

Preoccupied with sunbeams, Will had looked away from the windows. His attention returns to the view outside of them now: the backyard, the two girls stiff with tension down by the stream - and the stranger standing in the woods across the water, movements loud with anger. More yelling, muffled through the walls and glass.

Marissa Schurr bends down to pick up a rock, and Will turns and runs out the door towards the back. Vaguely aware of Hannibal right behind him, another right behind Hannibal. Alana's new acquaintance?

(*May you live in interesting times* is a *curse.*)

The stranger - boy? Man? - over the other side of the stream turns tail and flees when he spots Will and Hannibal coming out of the house. Abigail and her friend notice someone is behind them and turn, starting up the slope towards Will when they realise who it is approaching them. Will half-skidding down the slope to their side.

“He said he was somebody’s brother,” Abigail explains before anyone can ask, all the happiness she had shown at seeing the Schurr girl again already leached out of her.

Will frowns, staring across the stream to see if he can spot any sight of the stranger lingering, any camp or vantage point where the intruder might have been watching the house. Nothing.

“Marissa,” says the woman who had followed Hannibal out of the house, arms folding exasperatedly across her chest. An authority figure in the girl’s life - parent, most likely. They look vaguely alike. “Come home.”

Marissa gives the woman an aggrieved look, and the air around their little gathering is suddenly perfumed with the scent of irritated omega. “No.”

Two aggrieved omegas now, similar enough in scent - cherries - that they are *definitely* family, and neither of them is Will or Abigail.

“Come. *Home,*” repeats Marissa Schurr’s mother, refusing to explain her decree and appear weak in front of other adults, and refusing to look in the direction of Abigail.

Will can read it in the dart of her pupils around Abigail’s negative space: she doesn’t *want* to look at Abigail Hobbs. (*We must not look at goblin men.*) Despite having likely lived next door to the girl for most of Abigail’s life, considering that her daughter and Abigail are apparently lifelong best friends. They must have been friendly, or at least known each other well. (*We must not buy their fruits.*)

To Marissa’s mother, Abigail Hobbs is the still-breathing presence of an ugly truth, an unseen danger allowed close enough to threaten the - tenuous - security of her offspring and the family nest. How many times over the years had Abigail innocently visited the Schurrs’ home to do her homework with Marissa, or the oblivious Marissa sat at the Hobbs’ family table and shared their meal?

(*Who knows upon what soil they fed their hungry thirsty roots?*)

Abigail glances worriedly at her friend.

“Can you stop being *such* a bitch?” Marissa snaps at her mother, but caves to parental pressure and turns to go. Reaching out to give one last squeeze to Abigail’s forearm, her wrist dragging the scent of friendly support and cherries across the fabric of Abigail’s coat. “See you later.”

Abigail manages one last small smile for her friend and a soft, “Bye.”

With the Schurrs gone, Will and Hannibal pick their way over to the other side of the stream to look for any signs of their intrusive ‘guest’ in the surrounding forest. They don’t find anything but the fading sharp-sour scent of a young alpha’s stress, anger and blood, but scout a brief perimeter of the Hobbs house before returning to where Abigail is waiting for them on the bank of the stream.

“He’s gone,” Will says, and watches Abigail’s shoulders drop in relief. She’d been scared. “You’ve never seen him before?”

“No.” Abigail shakes her head. Her blue eyes still as large as a small woodland creature’s, as though she is *still* scared - but of Will. Chastising her. Telling her to expect more dreadful things.

Will sighs, reaching up to rub at an ache in his chest. “Let’s get back inside. There were some things you wanted to pack up, weren’t there?”

Mutely, Abigail nods, and all but scurries back up towards the house and the less terrifying prospect of Alana Bloom waiting there for her. Clearly rethinking to whom she can now bear to impart her secrets.

“We should report this, yes?” Hannibal asks from behind Will.

Will glances back at him. Apparently Hannibal still hasn’t learnt what kind of footwear is or isn’t appropriate to go trekking around forests in, as the good Dr. Lecter appears to be wiping mud off his shoes onto the dry leaves on the ground. “Yes.”

Will gets to make that *delightful* phonecall whilst Alana and Hannibal help Abigail to begin packing up a few things to take back to Port Haven with her. The task isn't as simple as it sounds; everything Abigail takes from the Hobbs' property has to be recorded.

Since the house is still an active crime scene, the only things that Abigail can remove are those things the justice system deems essential to her immediate life and livelihood. Life-saving medications and equipment (of which Abigail has none), enough clothes that Abigail won’t be out on the street with nothing to wear (all of them politely ignoring the fact Alana has already arranged replacement clothing for Abigail so the girl can take *some* of her own clothes from the house), Abigail’s purse and ID. As an omega, Abigail is also allowed to take a few soft, scented items from her home to prevent what is known colloquially as a ‘dynamic drop’.

Individuals exposed to severe prolonged stress and with no means of - preferably familiar - scented comfort exterior to themselves can suddenly go - or *drop* - into a state of shock. Their blood pressure crashes; they hyperventilate… nausea, vomiting, a faint and irregular pulse, dizziness, and loss of consciousness can all follow. In the most extreme cases, so can death.

As one of the most common - final - triggers for dynamic drop is when an already traumatised omega enters heat without any scented nesting items around them, the condition is also frequently referred to as an *omega* drop. It can, however, affect any gender or dynamic, with a higher tendency towards drops in omegas, then alphas, and then betas raised in a household with close alpha/omega family members.

By the time Will finishes his phonecall, Alana and Hannibal have only just managed to track down the evidence box that contains Abigail’s favourite gloves and scarf. The latter is a fat, fluffy woollen thing that possibly reminds her of Marissa, fragrant with Abigail’s scent and the smells of the woods and fabric softener.

When Abigail buries her face in it, her eyes brimming up with tears that still refuse to flow, her companions do her the courtesy of pretending not to notice.

Since there is nothing else that Abigail wants - or is really allowed to have - in the living room, the next stop is her parents' room. Abigail leading the way.

Louise Hobbs had, apparently, been the sort of omega to build a family nest in every communal room save the bathroom during her pre-heats. Dismantling each of them after her heat was finished and packing their materials away in a built-in cupboard in her permanent nesting room - a small room just off the master bedroom, which in a beta household would probably have been used for a walk-in wardrobe.

Abigail wants one of the 'communal' blankets that her mother had most frequently used for the family nest in the living room, she explains; they're big soft fleecy things, double-lined, and old enough the scent of *family* has soaked into them all but permanently.

Nests and nesting materials, however, have to be processed the same way as the rest of the house.

When Abigail walks into her mother's private nesting room, instead of the familiar, comforting sight of her mother's handiwork and a structured nest, instead of the soothing scent of her mother, feeling safe and content… Abigail walks into the cold, alien environment of another room full of packed evidence boxes, the clinical scents of passing strangers overlaid over her mother's.

She freezes.

"...Abigail," Alana says carefully, correctly reading the shock that has paralysed her charge's frame but not quite daring to step over the threshold of the bedroom to Louise Hobbs' nesting room without permission. Even to offer Abigail comfort.

Entering a nest - even an empty nest - uninvited is taboo, and alphas and betas have been mauled as a result. Omegas… uninvited omegas can occasionally get away with it, in emergencies.

"Her nest is gone," Abigail whispers. She's gone white, and Will can smell sour fear and something sharp, like bleeding tree sap in a frost.

Will cannot help the thin discontented hum - almost a *whine* - building up in the back of his throat at the scent and sound of Abigail's distress, shifting his weight from one foot to the other behind Alana. He doesn't even realise he's doing it until Hannibal reaches out and touches him from the side, his large palm a sudden warm pressure on Will's spine.

Will startles, his head jerking to the left to see what had touched him - and meets Hannibal's warm, whiskey-brown gaze and all its frank understanding.

Will calms a little after that, accepting the scant comfort where it's offered and allowing his weight to settle into the support spreading warm and steady in the small of his back.

“All the materials your mother used should still be here,” Alana says, trying to be comforting but instead only appearing utterly *blind* in her own dynamic.

A nest isn’t - just - its *materials.* It’s the style and whimsy of the person who made it. It’s the *effort* that went into making it.

“Her *nest* is gone,” Abigail repeats louder than before - upset, horrified, and offended. Swivelling on her heel to the nearest large evidence box to tear its lid off and grab the first thing to hand inside: a blanket, already bagged. Her trembling hand clenches; claws gouge into the plastic. *“How could they* - is *my* nest gone?!”

Most likely.

Alana hesitates. “Abigail -”

Abigail shoves past all of them and takes off running.

After a few stunned heartbeats Will is right behind her, following Abigail around furniture and through the doorways of the Hobbs’ house until they find her bedroom.

The FBI had gotten there long before them.

Abigail’s room is built on three levels: the entryway, a raised upper area where Abigail’s bed is, and a sunken level. Off the sunken area, a traditional nesting cavity has been built underneath the raised area - and its contents have very clearly already been thoroughly raided, the nest’s doors left sitting open, the space within cold and empty whilst a stack of unfriendly evidence boxes sit, filled, just outside.

Abigail manages to make it down the steps into the lower area of her bedroom before she drops, the sight of her raided nest draining the last of her energy from her and sending her crumpling to the floor.

Putting on a spurt of speed - and almost twisting his ankle on Abigail’s bedroom steps -, Will manages to catch Abigail before she falls too hard or too far, Abigail’s forehead falling against his shoulder rather than the carpet even as Will’s own knees hit the floor. He’s half-expecting Abigail to stiffen up like she had done at Port Haven or even shriek at Will to go away, to get away from her nest and out of her room, but, instead, Abigail clings to him tightly. Her nails prick Will sharply even through three layers of clothing, and she disconsolately turns her face into his chest and *wails.* A cry of pure omega heartbreak.

There’s nothing to be done here. The agents processing the scene can leave no stone unturned in looking for any remnants of Garret Jacob Hobbs’ victims, be it the victims’ clothing or items made from their bones, skin and hair, and nests have to be investigated the same as everything else in the house. That knowledge, however, does nothing for the instinctive *outrage* Will feels at seeing another omega’s nest so coldly, clinically, torn apart - another omega he feels *responsible for -,* and the violation of it all sets his blood aflame even as the weeping Abigail settles further into his arms, her distress turning the world to blazing gold in Will’s sight.

Unfortunate for Alana, then, that she picks that moment to stumble into Abigail's bedroom.

The lurch to Alana's movement as her heels catch the carpet and the *swoop* of the vivid blue edges of her coat seize Will's attention like a fish hook through an open eye.

In a world gone gold, Abigail's distress all around them, all Will sees is *another* intruder near the nest. *Beta.* He doesn't think; Will pulls at Abigail until his own body is curved between hers and the intruder's, his lips peel back from his fangs, and he *snarls.*

Alana (and *fuck,* it's *Alana*; he's just snarled at *Alana*) freezes like a frightened rabbit. In the stunned silence that falls between the snarl and them both realising what Will has done - and wondering if Will even regrets it -, Will sees Alana's blue blue eyes and pink pink mouth go wide - and another shadow reaching into the bedroom to hook around her shoulders, gently pulling Alana backwards and out of the bedroom door. Hannibal? Hannibal.

After Abigail's grief and Alana's fearful surprise, meeting Hannibal's eyes across the bedroom's expanse is like a cool wash of calmness across the flashing landscape of Will's brain. Practical in the face of Abigail's distress smearing itself against their bodies and the walls, analysing the situation with a surgeon's deft calm. A reader turning the card of the ravaged lightning-struck Tower.

There is none of Alana's provocative *concern* in Hannibal's gaze. Will sees interest there, and something a little pleased, like what Will is doing is something that Hannibal approves of.

Something close to pleasure thrills down Will's back when their eyes lock and Will basks in it - until Hannibal looks away to deal with the shaken Alana, and Will is reminded of his own charge. Abigail's tears are soaking his sweater.

It is a rare thing to see Alana Bloom so disquieted that she feels driven to pace the floor, a sharp energy to her movements as she marches the length of the Hobbs' living room and back again three times in a row.

Hannibal considerately occupies the same length of time it takes for Alana to do so with moving the evidence boxes they had left scattered over the floor earlier that are now in Alana's path, placing one of them in Alana's arms when she pauses long enough on the turn in her circuit beside him. When life has upset or confounded her, Alana has always functioned best when handed something productive to do, however small or unrelated it might be to her current source of worry. A reminder to herself that problems can be fixed; the broken may be mended.

It is a pity that Alana only sees fractures as an issue to resolve rather than lingering a while to admire the chaotic beauty of fractal design, always seeking to walk back to the state that

existed before rather than embracing the creation arising from destruction.

Galaxies are made from the collapse of matter into burning stars, implosion birthing the lights that fill the otherwise bleak darkness of the cosmos. And then humans, marvelling at the sight, invent stories about them.

“Has it been so long since you last had an omega snarl at you?” Hannibal asks Alana whilst she is still blinking down at the evidence box so suddenly deposited into her arms, pitching his tone carefully at a point between sympathy and wry humour. “Surely one of your patients must have at least attempted it at some point. My own omega clientèle occasionally muster a snarl, and I do not believe them, as a whole, to be more combative than most.”

“...Well, yes…” Alana stumbles out, trained from her years in residency as his protégée to automatically follow Hannibal when he picks up another box and moves to take it over to the sideboard out of the way. “But, Hannibal,” Alana regains some of her wits with each step, “there’s a great deal of difference between triggering a snarl from a patient in the midst of therapy as a trauma response, and-” Alana hesitates.

“And...?”

“And *that,*” Alana says, tipping her head very pointedly in the direction of Abigail’s bedroom - from which Abigail and Will have still not emerged. It is quiet there now. “Whatever that was.”

Hannibal raises his brows, allowing Alana to see some of his disapproval of her poorly-worded - and implicitly close-minded - concerns. “*That,* I believe, was an unfortunate but perfectly normal response to an abnormal situation. Omegas often grow protective when defending their young from perceived threats.”

Will had followed his instincts and sought to comfort a grieving omega/child - someone his hindbrain still recognises somehow as *daughter.* Abigail’s instincts had allowed Will, a fellow omega, into her territory to aid and comfort her, even in her occasional flashes of petulant anger at him recognising that Will is a source of comfort, security and opportunity for her.

As a beta, Alana had registered as an intruder near to the nest - increasing Abigail’s distress and Will’s protective instincts accordingly. That Will had *only* snarled at her is a testament to their friendship and Will’s self-control - or perhaps because Abigail’s weight had been anchoring Will in place in the time it had taken for Hannibal to gently pull Alana from the room.

Abigail’s omega cry of distress and the fresh scent of her sorrow have both ceased now, at least. The air clearing after the tempest.

Hannibal can understand a little of Abigail’s grief at the destruction of her mother’s sanctuary, compounded as it is by her own personal violation. Hannibal had once witnessed the haven of his own - beta - mother tarnished along with the rest of his childhood home under not dissimilar circumstances.

There had been clouds painted on the ceiling. As a baby nursing, Hannibal had opened his eyes and seen his mother's bosom blended with the clouds, the soft edges of her blouse tickling against his face. The scent of warm skin and breastmilk had blended with the smell of her perfume of ambergris and the lemon-oil polish used for the furniture, for the intricately carved woodwork that panelled the walls.

Hannibal had loved his mother's room with its many scents, the faces carved in the woodwork, its painted ceiling. Simonetta Sforza-Lecter had been of the Sforza on one side and Visconti on the other, and had brought the room with her to Lithuania from Milan. Whilst she had lived, no-one had been allowed to enter that room without her permission each time save her children; even Hannibal's father had been obliged to wait for her consent at the door. After she had died -

Hannibal does not visit the memory of his mother's room as he had seen it after she had died, its door firmly closed and bolted in the depths of his mind. Abigail would be wise to do the same.

Away now from clouds and lemon-oil polish and days long ago, Alana's frustration is a palpable thing, mossy green underneath the perfume of violets still lingering on her skin. "She's not *his young,* Hannibal!"

"She is a young person currently under his protection - *among others* - " Hannibal adds, seeing Alana open her mouth to argue with him, "and, at the moment, they are the only omegas in our group. Omegas often turn instinctively to others of their own dynamic in times of crisis, Alana; you know this. Anything unfamiliar outside of that registers on a base level as a threat."

Paramedics are often omegas for exactly that reason. Even an injured omega who logically knows they require medical attention may instinctively lash out despite themselves at an alpha or beta.

Alana looks away, the plain truth sticking as it sinks down her throat. Logic can occasionally sit quite poorly beside emotion, and Alana is smarting at being rejected by both a patient and a friend, however little their own higher thought processes had to do with it.

(Though Hannibal has only ever found very little comfort in the 'reassurance' that instinctive rejections are somehow a lesser hurt to logical ones. How is it worse to be spurned for cold, hard facts than it is to be rejected by the whole primal essence of another's being?)

"Will's never snarled at me before," Alana confesses eventually, quietly. Worry rather than fondness still in her eyes as they flick to the sound of footsteps approaching the living room.

Hannibal is unaccustomed to being disappointed in Alana Bloom, but watching her attraction to Will Graham subside slightly because his fierce, wonderful, and instinctual protection of a vulnerable omega teenager was partially protection against *her* is disappointing.

They really would make the most unsuitable couple.

Hannibal ensures all traces of his thoughts are wiped from his face before he looks up at Will and Abigail who have rejoined them. The salt of tears sharp in the air.

Will appears tired and somewhat sheepish. Abigail's eyes are dry now but rimmed with red, her cheeks still blotchy from crying. She has three filled evidence bags and a faded stuffed rabbit toy in her arms, and the blanket that had come from the bag in her mother's nesting room has been draped over her shoulders. Obviously by Will - the fabric is scented faintly with sweet spice and winter pine-smoke, a light layer that rests atop the mingled scents of the Hobbs' family, in particular the late Louise Hobbs' soft summery scent of lemon, blackberries and honeysuckle.

Hannibal is reminded of the practice of dressing orphaned and rejected newborn lambs in the skins of dead ones so the bereaved ewe will accept them as her own. Will, although he likely had not meant to, has done something similar in reverse, dressing the lamb in the scent of her dead mother - and him - to soothe her, linking one with the other.

"I think we should head back to the motel now," Will says, deliberately loud enough the eye falls naturally on him rather than Abigail. Alana judging silently. "We'll go to the cabin tomorrow."

They grab a late dinner on the way from a nearby diner that Abigail recommends, Hannibal sent inside to order their food to go since Abigail is still too recognisable to the locals.

At the motel, they sit in Alana and Abigail's room and eat bowls of chilli and cornbread muffins (Alana and Abigail), a Juicy Lucy cheeseburger with extra bacon and fries (Will), and a - not totally inedible - fried walleye with fries (Hannibal), washing everything down with a mixture of water, milkshakes, and sweet iced tea. Abigail, Will and Alana had also opted for dessert by means of blue moon ice-cream sundaes, their plastic containers filled with neon blue ice-cream, globs of whipped cream, raspberry syrup, and sprinkles. An indulgence to encourage Abigail to feel better, excused as an upper Midwest marvel.

Will offers Hannibal a little plastic spoonful of the stuff when he catches Hannibal frowning at it, waggling the spoon at Hannibal with laughing eyes when Hannibal initially declines. "C'mon, you should try some. Even if only to figure out how you'd make it better yourself."

"Hannibal makes wonderful ice-creams and sorbets," Alana confirms. Before lowering her voice conspiratorially to Abigail beside her and feeling the need to disclose, "At his Christmas dinner party a few years ago, a fellow doctor ate his pomegranate and clementine sorbet and proposed marriage."

"Quite a few years ago," Hannibal adds with a sniff. "And she was quite inebriated at the time."

"You declined then, I take it?" Will asks, amused, still waving his little spoon.

"As I said, she was inebriated. And she proposed a great deal besides *marriage.*" All of it highly unsuitable for the dinner table.

Will's eyes are still laughing at Hannibal, some of the tiredness eased out of their corners by the sweet ice-cream and gentle jesting at Hannibal's expense. Gold threads through the blue of his irises, *kintsugi* in natural design. "Take her up on any of it when she was sober?"

"You must allow me *some* secrets," Hannibal says, leaning closer to the other man to accept the press of the ice-cream-laden spoon against his lips.

Cold, creamy blue sludge slides against Hannibal's tongue, heavy with cheap syrup, processed sprinkles and cream. Lemon-raspberry-marshmallow sweet and tart.

"...It tastes like the Lucky Charms leprechaun just died in my mouth."

Abigail chokes whilst swallowing her milkshake.

Chapter End Notes

Oof, I realise I promised you all a monster chapter, but the final part of this one was trying to take the wordcount for this chapter up beyond 15k which is, frankly, *too much* monster, so it's been shuffled to the next chapter.

Mirepoix: (from Occitan *mirapeis*, supposedly from *mire peis*, 'see the fish') A flavour base made from diced vegetables that are cooked, usually with butter, oil, or other fat, for a long time on a low heat without colouring or browning. It is not sautéed or otherwise hard cooked because the intention is to sweeten the ingredients rather than caramelise them.
The name allegedly comes from the aristocratic employer of the chef who first invented/established/defined the technique: in this case, Charles-Pierre-Gaston François de Lévis, duc de Lévis-Mirepoix (1699–1757).

Japanese pork dumplings with ginger and green onion

A murder house is ugly to the neighbors, like the face of someone who betrayed them. Only outsiders and children stare. - Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon*
[...]*it is not healing to see your childhood home, but it helps you measure whether you are broken, and how and why, assuming you want to know.* - Thomas Harris, *Hannibal Rising*
"We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?" - Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*
Hannibal loved his mother's room with its many scents, the faces carved in the woodwork, its painted ceiling. Madame Lecter was of the Sforza on one side and a Visconti on the other, and she had brought the room with her from Milan.
Clouds painted on the ceiling. As a baby nursing he used to open his eyes and see his

mother's bosom blended with the clouds. The feel of the edges of her blouse against his face. - Thomas Harris, *Hannibal Rising*

Hannibal makes reference to the 2012 University of Rochester follow-up study to the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment, but other studies following this one backed up some of its assertions. Faith in the reliability of the authority figure giving out the rewards has been shown to affect the decisions made by the children in the experiment (amongst other factors): children who believe - or have been demonstrably shown - a particular adult will break their promises are much less likely to wait, or wait a longer time, for a reward from that adult, even if the promised reward for waiting is larger than the one immediately offered.

blanquette

Chapter Summary

Hannibal makes some revelations. Abigail's trip home proceeds to get worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal does not linger in the shower overlong. He had wished to wash the smell of travel and a long day from his skin, but the best the motel shower can offer him is a thin, tepid stream of water that takes a solid four minutes just to thoroughly wet his hair.

After washing, Hannibal dries himself off and pulls on a pair of navy pyjama bottoms. Padding out of the bathroom into the twin motel room Jack Crawford had booked him into with Will, intent on grabbing the matching pyjama top still folded in his bag. Appearances are important, after all. Suggestions.

Tonight, Will seems to have decided to demonstrate that principle. Taking the time Hannibal had been in the bathroom to remove his shoes and shuck off his jacket and sweater, lying sideways - and *suggestively* - over the bed that they had decided was Hannibal's for the night. His head is half-hanging over the edge of the mattress as he holds his phone aloft above his face, his curls swept downwards by gravity.

Leaving his bag alone for now, Hannibal approaches Will on the bed: his thighs by Will's head, his face tilted in query down at Will's uplifted face. "It was my understanding that you had claimed the *other* bed."

"Oh, I have," Will says blithely enough, letting his arms fall to either side of his torso and take his phone screen down to the mattress. Even upside-down, the insouciant tilt of his head makes Hannibal want to bite down on the pulse in his throat. "Figured I might try propositioning you on this one though, lack of pomegranate sorbet notwithstanding."

"Pomegranate and *clementine,"* Hannibal corrects, allowing his lips to tip upwards into a lopsided grin when Will laughs, Will's fingertips stretching out to skate over the muscles of Hannibal's thighs beneath their fabric covering.

The air is thickly scented with smoke and spice, the gleam of omega gold bright beneath Will's thick, coyly lowered lashes. The thieving firebird singing in the apple tree.

"This okay?" Those fingers curve around the meat of Hannibal's legs, urging Hannibal to step a little closer to the bed even as Will shuffles himself up so his head hangs even further over the mattress' edge.

Warm breath spills over Hannibal's abdomen, steamier than the shower had been. This is *more* than okay.

"Perhaps I should be asking *you* that," Hannibal murmurs, and lowers one of his own hands to cup the side of Will's face, his palm curving around Will's temple and into the riotous mess of Will's dark curls. Bright neurons are firing off and connecting ideas in myriad fascinating, impossible ways beneath the thin dome of bone cradled in Hannibal's hand, a storm of shooting stars in the breathing velvet night. "Yours is not the most comfortable position."

"Mm." Will's mouth pouts a kiss against Hannibal's bellybutton, his nose already dragging through the hair trailing down Hannibal's abdomen. Knees bending pleasingly so his socked feet slide against the bed's thin green coverlet. "I'll let you know when I want up."

Hannibal has never been one to refuse a gift. He gives Will a hand by pushing down the band of his pyjama bottoms to mid-thigh, but what follows is entirely Will's design.

Will eases himself into it, pressing soft little sucking kisses to Hannibal's belly and the warm, thin skin around his groin. When Will has better orientated himself to working upside-down to the way this act is commonly performed his lips part for swift, almost kittenish, little licks across Hannibal's testes, up one side of Hannibal's cock and down the other. No extra attention is spared for Hannibal's slit; plush lips kiss away the wetness beading there and move on even before Hannibal has finished shuddering at that little scorching touch of tongue.

Will's hair tickles the inner flesh of Hannibal's thighs even as Hannibal's penis swells further, butting, flushed and impatient with blood and a thin slick of saliva, against Will's mouth. Almost rude of him, the burn of desire building in all the deepest parts of Hannibal: belly, chest, and a low and building rumble in his throat.

Will swallows him down - past lips, teeth, the wet warm dizzying slide across tongue and hard palate, soft palate, the tightness of the pharynx behind - in one long smooth pull to the back of Hannibal's thighs. His lips tight and filthy around the base of Hannibal's cock, until Hannibal has to either spread his legs and widen his stance on the motel room carpet or else risk toppling disastrously over Will on the bed.

Will's claws prick at the bare flesh of Hannibal's behind, coaxing Hannibal into rocking his hips in a torturously slow glide. Back and forth into the prick of sweet pain and a long slow suck, into the tight fluttering clench of Will's throat around the head of his cock. Little ticklish puffs of breath gust against Hannibal's balls from Will's nose, saliva and dribbles of precome beginning to drip steadily from Will's mouth and back over his cheeks, down Hannibal's groin. Will laps sloppily at the drooling head of Hannibal's penis those few times one of them misjudges a thrust and Hannibal almost falls from the wet home of Will's mouth, brought back into his predetermined place by gratifyingly eager fingers and tongue, a swift, succulent suck that occasionally thrills over the - not totally accidental - rake of Will's fangs.

Hannibal does as much as Will will allow him to to support Will's head, to relieve some of the strain the angle and the mattress are undoubtedly placing on Will's neck as Hannibal thrusts, but Will blindly takes one of Hannibal's supporting hands and places it high over his

own neck. Encouraging Hannibal to press down with his palm to feel his own cock as it pushes past Will's gag reflex and deep into the slick wet heat of his throat again and again.

A beautiful little masochist, his toes curling in pleasure on the motel coverlet at the permitted abuse.

Hannibal's grip tightens further around Will's vulnerable throat, imagining the peacock hues of bruises there fitted to the shape of his hands, the slick glove of Will's insides fluttering even more tightly around Hannibal's cock. Will allows it: moaning deliciously as Hannibal claims him, chokes him, inside and out, Hannibal's rock-hard penis spreading and claiming Will's gorge with slow, determined pushes whilst Hannibal's hands wrap like a locked collar around his neck.

All Hannibal can taste is the heavy, heady scent of Will's arousal: the sweat where it gathers in the bends of Will's body under his clothes, the sweet thick scent of omega slick that seeps through the denim of the jeans Will is still determinedly wearing. The spicy dough-like scent of Will's pregnancy hormones mixed with his natural scent, nature's cry for protection and care.

Hannibal thrusts in harder, deep steady ruts that slap his testes against the brow of Will's nose, his forehead, that keep Will's lips stretched obscenely wide and swollen around him, bruised between his own teeth and Hannibal's pelvic bone. Hannibal's cock always fat and heavy on Will's flattened tongue and buried home at the back of Will's throat each time.

During pregnancy cardiac output increases by 30 to 50%. As the amount of blood pumped by the heart increases, the resting heart rate of the pregnant individual speeds up from the average pre-pregnancy rate of approximately 70 beats per minute to 80 or 90 beats per minute.

Will's pulse is racing against the cage of Hannibal's fingers, his throat working trying to swallow, failing, swallow again, blood rushing to his head at a rate faster than it has probably ever gotten there before. He moans again when Hannibal's hand slides down the column of his neck and into the skin bared by the open collar of Will's shirt. The heel of Hannibal's right palm presses against Will's Adam's apple as Hannibal's fingers skim over the faint protrusion of Will's left scent gland - more prominent now than usual due to Will's arousal and the current angle of Will's neck. Hannibal rubs against it to feel Will's choked, helpless, and moaning purr reverberate around his cock, lifting those fingers to suck into his mouth when a gulping Will pushes him away at last. Laving away the taste of Will's sweat and natural oils, salt and sweetness.

Will is a gasping mess as he pushes himself upright, his chest still heaving for breath. The armpits of his red-checked tartan shirt are stained dark with sweat and his face is red, fever-bright from exertion and the blood that has gathered there from hanging upside-down. His lips are as ripe and swollen as bruised plums at harvest-time, begging to be bitten, and his mouth and cheeks are smeared with precome and saliva, shiny in the humming motel lights overhead. His eyes are all gold now, limned in lightning blue. Spattered with the glittering diamonds of reactionary tears.

The almost arrogant jut of his chin despite it all makes Hannibal want to cradle his skull tenderly once more and then slam it repeatedly into the wall.

Hannibal smiles at him, teeth bared. “Were your thoughts about today’s events so clamorous you needed them physically driven from your head?”

Will bears his own fangs at Hannibal for that - before wiping his mouth dry against his sleeve, burning friction into his cheeks. “You can try and shrink me or you can fuck me, and I’d prefer it if you did the latter.” His voice rasps from hard use, and Hannibal’s cock throbs again at the sound of it.

“Far be it for me to disappoint,” Hannibal says, letting his pyjama bottoms drop the rest of the way to the floor so he can step out of them.

Catching the - beta - condom that Will digs out from his jeans' pocket and tosses at Hannibal as Will wriggles out of his own clothes on the bed, elegance discarded in favour of familiar practicality.

Hannibal’s lips curve downwards. “I see you picked up the right type of protection this time.”

For a man with his hips thrust up into the air as he yanks off a pair of slick-sodden boxer shorts, Will manages to look incredibly arch. “That still smarting your ego, huh? You really got knot-envy over some plastic and silicone?”

(The underwear has enough liquid weight to it that it slaps when it hits the carpet.)

The sarcastic quirk to Will’s lips fades when he looks over just in time to catch the way Hannibal pauses, Hannibal’s brow furrowed with incomprehension, unwrapped condom like a coin to flip between his fingertips.

“...My *toys,* Hannibal.”

...Toys.

“...That would help with keeping them clean,” Hannibal allows after a few moments, as neutrally as he can manage whilst white noise crackles at the forefront of his mind. Perplexed that he had not even *considered* that Will Graham might have sex toys he would use knotting condoms on to help keep clean. Despite the simple fact *many* people use knotting sex toys. Particularly omegas, for help during their heats.

How lax of him.

Hannibal purses his lips. “Forgive me, I assumed they were for your alpha lovers.”

Will laughs at him huskily, pulling Hannibal onto the bed by the hips - before catching Hannibal’s expression again and realising Hannibal isn’t joking. “Oh - you’re *serious?* ”

As though the thought of any alpha pursuing him is a ridiculous idea. Hannibal frowns.

"Jesus," Will falls back on his elbows, shaking his head a little to unstick his hair from where it clings to the sweat on his skin, "I think the last time I slept with an alpha was- uh - two? Two and a half years ago? It was terrible. Contrary to popular opinion, just shoving your knot in does not equal instant omega orgasm."

Two and a half years ago.

"My sympathies," Hannibal says, prowling over the territory spread out before him and bowing his head over Will's shoulder to mouth kisses to the still-thundering pulse in Will's long stretched throat. Shielding his own expression from Will's too-observant golden eyes.

His spit-slick cock is throbbing almost painfully now, missing the heat of Will's mouth, pounding with the confused anger - or angry confusion - hot now in Hannibal's blood. "You must have admirers."

"For some reason," Will says, sighing as he falls back even further into the pillows beneath him. His hand raised to thread fingers through Hannibal's hair and hold Hannibal in place. "And I'd rather not. You?"

Will is lying. Will *has* to be lying, or else the details around his pregnancy don't add up. The knotting condoms used by alphas. The scent of an alpha's - or numerous alphas' - sexual longing on Will's clothes. The Halloween pumpkin gift, surely a courting gift, precursor to an invitation to an alpha's den. The simple fact alone that Will *is* pregnant, approximately a month or so along, and yet every time Hannibal has mounted the omega, Hannibal has worn a condom.

If the knotting condoms are simply for sex toys, and the scent of longing only from a passing admirer… If the pumpkin had simply been a casual gift, then *who* has impregnated Will Graham without Will being aware that their seed has taken? There are too many alphas - not to mention the *others* capable of impregnating an omega - in the hallowed halls of the FBI for Hannibal to investigate without *some* sort of guidance from Will.

Hannibal makes himself smile again - albeit with too many teeth - against the underside of Will's jaw. The reverberations of Will's answering groan buzz through his lips.

"Forget I asked. Your list's probably full of snobby rich people."

"If you're interested in the salacious details -"

"I. Am. Not." Will pulls at Hannibal's hair, demanding, "Fuck me."

"Since you asked so nicely," Hannibal murmurs, more than happy to oblige.

Will is wet and warm and - relatively - pliant, parting for Hannibal's cock again with a soft push and a beautiful little gasp. His already swollen mouth turned to Hannibal's for Hannibal to bite kisses into, his cock hard and smearing steady dripping wetness between their bellies as Hannibal keeps his movements slow and firm against Will's prostate.

Will pants against Hannibal's mouth, nails scratching against Hannibal's scalp. He always gets so wet when Hannibal takes him; the slippery glide of Hannibal's cock into his hungry little hole is so smooth that it's obscene. Will's insides grip Hannibal's cock tight with clench after squeezing, dizzying clench, already bred and still begging to be stuffed full.

One day soon, Hannibal is going to have Will Graham bare. Keep Will tied up in his bed for hours - *days* -, fucked full of cock and come and plugged-up tight between uses. Until Will has sunk into the silk around his throat, his wrist and ankles, until his belly strains with Hannibal's food and Hannibal's seed, until he's sobbing with pleasure, with need, and no other name but Hannibal's is in his body and his brain.

Strained after Will's determined efforts earlier, Hannibal does not intend to draw things out for too much longer between them, driving Will to a quick, gasping release before he allows himself to tip over the edge. His hand firm around Will's cock as he tugs Will through the last shuddering spurts of his pleasure, drinking down in deep filthy kisses the laboured breaths Will pants against his mouth.

Will sinks back, boneless, into the bed - Hannibal's bed -, spent.

Hannibal pulls out of him, careful not to spill the contents of his condom everywhere when his hands are slippery with the condom's thin coating of lube and Will's slick. With the shining gloss of the mixture on Will's ass and thighs, it can be hard to tell by sight if a condom has spilled or torn and, due to his hyperosmia, Hannibal would always have the bitter scent of semen mixed with the smells of Will and sex and sweat in his nose either way.

...*Ah.* Ah.

Understanding trickles like icy snowmelt down Hannibal's spine, his stomach suddenly churning with the fries he'd choked down as part of his dinner. Acid and fats mixing poorly with the uncommon experience of feeling like a fool. The blue moon of Will's ice-cream: the taste politely indescribable, but its name a truly portentous sign.

Once in a blue moon…

Hannibal might have always taken Will Graham with a condom on, but it only takes the tiniest microtear in a condom's lining for sperm to escape. An omega's fertility drops dramatically outside of their heat - but almost all omegas are still incredibly fertile on one side or the other of their heats, and can still, very, *very* rarely, be impregnated even outside of that time period.

That is partially the reason why Will even *has* Hannibal wearing condoms, since Will is not on suppressants or another kind of regular contraceptive, as well as for clean-up.

If Will isn't lying -

The future fractures, shifts and rearranges itself before Hannibal's eyes, new paths appearing in the palace of his mind to diverge and diverge again. Fathomless new possibilities born in a cheap little Minnesotan motel room, a place so insignificant it seems impossible its roof and

four walls do not crumble and fall trying to contain such splendorous shattering multitudes. Borne of something as *pedestrian* as a potential broken condom.

Wonders are built upon banalities. Hannibal ties and throws the used condom in the bin, turning back to the bed where Will Graham still lies, bare and replete. Leonine in satiation, lit gold by the overhead lights and half dozing. Utterly ignorant of the sudden seismic shift in Hannibal's world, of the secrets and possibilities building in Hannibal's mind, growing in his own belly.

A gift. Unasked for. Unlooked for. Unthought of until unthinkingly given.

If Will isn't lying. But a paternity test should answer that, especially now there is a specific potential father to match genetic material against.

Hannibal should have thought of the possibility that their protection might have failed them, and that he could therefore be the father of Will's child. *Why* had Hannibal not thought of the possibility?

Want burns in Hannibal's chest: in his heart, in his lungs, sinking clawed covetous fire into his gut. A young girl's laughter echoes in the rarely-trodden hallways of his mind.

"I realise we didn't establish any rules or boundaries before we embraced the more physically intimate side of our relationship, so I'd like to discuss that with you now."

Will cracks an eye open at him. *"After* we've just been physically intimate again?" Wonderful, dangerous, *miraculous* thing. The rasp of Will's voice adds a delicious reverberation to his drawl. He'll be feeling Hannibal's cock in his throat every time he swallows for the next few days. "Go on, then. Shoot."

"This is not the kind of relationship where we demand sexual exclusivity of one another," Hannibal says, "but I would ask you to inform me if you are seeing anyone else in a romantic and/or sexual capacity. And I, of course, would return the courtesy." He returns to the side of the bed, offering Will his hand with the brief explanation: "A few too many poor experiences in my past with casual lovers who neglected to inform their other partners of my existence."

Will grins at that, as intended, taking Hannibal's hand and letting himself be pulled into sitting upright. "Any wild escapes down the drainpipe in the dead of night? Brawls in your birthday suit?"

"I would prefer not to tread on any toes, Will."

"No toes to tread on but my own." Will's eyes are uplifted then, for a moment: clear and blue and guileless as a summer's day. He's not lying.

The world tilts again. Rocks for a moment before it settles on new tracks.

Hannibal nods, and gives himself a moment to bend, leaning down to press a brief, close-mouthed kiss to Will's forehead. Will looks startled by the sweetness, but his confusion gets

swept away by the thought required to answer Hannibal's next question. "Have you any stipulations you'd like to add?"

Studying the air to the right of Hannibal's ear, Will considers. Then, gaze sharpening, "*This,*" he states firmly. "This stays between us."

Hannibal is more than happy to agree to his terms. For now. Thumb rubbing against the back of Will's hand, still in his grasp - "I believe I have already informed you that I prefer not to kiss and tell."

It doesn't take much to coax Will into taking a shower after that. His body is still a mess of sex - slick and sweat -, and the motel bed beneath him has already soaked up their excesses and left an unpleasant wet spot for any inhabitants to lie in.

With no desire to *be* that inhabitant, Hannibal uses the time Will is in the bathroom to turn down the sheets on the second bed available to them and boil water in the shoddy little kettle the motel has provided for their use.

Two cups of soothing herbal tea, prepared using homemade sachets Hannibal had brought with him in his luggage, sit still faintly steaming on the motel room's battered table by the time Will emerges from his shower to join Hannibal again, the omega wearing nothing but a t-shirt and a clean pair of underwear again. Clearly his preferred sleeping attire.

Hannibal's cup of tea is half-drunk already and Will's full one sits before an empty seat. The air is delicately perfumed with the scent of roses, now added to by the scent of cheap shampoo arising from Will's still damp hair. (Does he never dry his hair?)

"Something to help us both sleep," Hannibal offers, catching Will's raised eyebrow.

"A few fingers of whiskey usually does for me," Will says, but picks up the cup to take a small sip regardless. He blinks, apparently pleasantly surprised by the taste judging by his expression, and swallows another mouthful before asking, "What *is* this?"

"A homemade blend," Hannibal says. "Rose, lemongrass, cocoa shells and raspberry leaf. A touch of rooibos."

"It tastes like Turkish Delight."

"Perfect for those cold nights then, when winter is drawing in." Will only hums in reply, and drains his cup. "I take it you like it?"

"Can't say I understand how it'll help me sleep," Will says with a shrug, trotting over to rinse out his cup at the sink, "but who am I to complain when a doctor prescribes me candy? It was appreciated, Hannibal. Thank you."

"Think nothing of it, Will," Hannibal murmurs, slowly finishing his own drink as Will continues to putter around their room, drying his cup, checking his clothes for the following day, disappearing into the bathroom again to brush his teeth.

Returning much more sluggishly to slide into the prepared clean bed, his eyes and limbs already drooping as he gestures to indicate Hannibal can join him there if he wishes to. The other bed, after all, is somewhat… bedraggled.

By the time Hannibal has finished his own tea and preparations for both tomorrow and bed, Will is unconscious. No understanding required for his cup of soothing Turkish Delight tea to prove efficacious.

For twenty minutes, Hannibal does nothing but sit on the mattress beside Will and watch the omega sleep. His fingers on the pulse at Will's bare throat to count the beat of Will's heart: slowed now, but regular for a pregnant individual in his situation.

Hannibal had been careful with the measure of liquid diazepam he had stirred into Will's tea, but there is always the risk of adverse effects when suddenly introducing new medications. Will Graham's life is now too precious to throw away for lack of a little study before Hannibal's departure - but not *so* sanctified that Hannibal cannot take a little liberty with Will's health when Hannibal requires it.

The clinically unnecessary diazepam in Will's system during pregnancy is a calculated risk - diazepam's current medically recorded side-effects affect pregnant individuals in the *third* trimester -, but a necessary one. At this stage of their relationship, at this stage of Will's *understanding,* it is much better for all parties involved if Will Graham sleeps the whole night through, oblivious to the bed empty for hours beside him. To Hannibal, dressing in carefully-selected, dark and discardable clothing from his bag, switching off all the lights and leaving the motel room like just another shadow in the night.

Will Graham has given, *is* giving, Hannibal Lecter the most profound gift.

Hannibal should return the favour.

The blue-gold half-light of Wolf Trap at sunset. Sunrise? The sun neither rises nor sets, rocking weirdly in the sky, low over the horizon. Golden rays slash against dying leaves to cut them from the tree branches, the breeze sweeping away the offerings to twirl, twirl, twirl dizzily into the gloaming.

Will breathes. In. Out. Quiet presses in against his ears, and he can hear the rushing of blood in his own skull.

Samantha- Lara- Diana- Penelope- Rebecca- April- Danielle- Elise- *Abigail* steps out of the trees, embroidered flowers blooming bright and pretty on her cardigan. They open and close, gasping for breath.

The wind plays with Abigail's wood-brown hair. The sun catches the light of her smile when she sees Will, gives her a dozen shadows in a corona around her as she steps across the grass as delicately as a doe to take his hand with one hand. Will cannot count her fingers.

"Mom."

Warm wetness pours down Will's throat, a smile sliced below his nose. Everything blurs about the daughter in front of him when she moves just a second too fast.

Abigail smiles back at him, and takes his other hand with her free one.

"Dad."

The branches of the trees behind her head shift and warp, bent by the wind into the shape of antlers.

The cover of night conceals Hannibal's return to the motel, the taste of opportunity seized like copper pennies under his tongue. He has time yet for another - unsatisfying, but more thorough - shower before sliding into bed beside Will for a few hours of sleep, his self-assigned tasklist for the night complete.

How unfortunate it is then for Hannibal to open the door to his dark dingy little motel room and be immediately confronted by the sight of Will Graham standing there waiting for him.

Hannibal stills, his hand still on the doorknob. "Will."

The hypnotic effects of the diazepam should not have worked their way through Will's system so quickly, but, if the emergence of paradoxical side effects could be linked to personality, Hannibal should have perhaps assumed that Will Graham and all his stubbornness would find this way to defy Hannibal's desires as well. So determined, even at a cellular level, to act against his own best interests.

Will says nothing, his lips pressed thin and eyes staring coldly at Hannibal at the threshold of their room, lit by the thin sliver of moon in the sky.

When Hannibal steps back inside the room and reaches out to shut - lock - the door behind his back, even that scant light disappears. Continuing to stand between Will and the only exit.

"Did I wake you?" he asks Will casually, candidly. Suggesting nothing of how long he might have been absent from the motel, nor offering any reason for that absence.

Only guilty men blurt excuses at first confrontation, and Hannibal carries no guilt on his shoulders. There is no room for it, especially now, Hannibal's mind rapidly sifting through

the list of his various safe-houses in North America, calculating the distance to the nearest and whether he can manage to take a subdued Will Graham to it and be back at the motel in Minnesota before Alana knocks on their room door in a few hours.

Hannibal cannot. If Will grows too suspicious here, too soon, Hannibal will have to make them *both* immediately disappear off the FBI's radar. Any other option would be the very worst kind of wasteful.

Will still says nothing, still staring - *blindly,* Hannibal slowly realises, the pupils of his eyes unfixed on anything this side of consciousness. Not following as Hannibal prowls across the room towards him.

Will is asleep. Standing upright, breathing normally and with his eyes wide open, but asleep.

In the dark motel room, Will could be a ghost - one of Queen Myrtha's wilis, perhaps -, a beautiful pale creature composed of moonlight and vengeance, swaying slightly with his breaths. De la Mare's Prince of Sleep, lovely in a lonely place.

Hannibal will have to recreate the image at some point, soft chalks on dark paper, a wreath of poppies set heavy on Will's slumbering brow. Haunting the solitary woods around his home alongside his dreams.

"Will," Hannibal says, more gently now, cupping the omega's still and lovely face with his hand. Curious as to whether he can stir Will with gentleness from his dreams, curious as to what may have triggered this bout of sleepwalking in Will when diazepam is so frequently used to *suppress* somnambulism.

The air is ripe with Will's sweat - fresh still, but already soaking his hair, the clothes he had gone to bed in. His arms are cold, prickled with gooseflesh, but his skin is clammy against Hannibal's palm. His face - his cheeks, his forehead - burn to the touch. Feverish.

Hannibal leans in, pressing his mouth tenderly to the stubble on Will's jaw, his nose to the hot hollow behind Will's ear. Breathing Will in.

There - above the developing pregnancy hormones, above Will's natural scent, so close to the blood beating in Will's skull -, there is a scent like burning sugar again, sweetness blackening in a stainless steel pan. A fevered sweetness, stronger than when Hannibal had first smelled it on Will only a little earlier in the week.

...It seems that there is something very wrong with Will Graham.

Hannibal leaves him for a moment to fetch a towel and a damp flannel from the bathroom, coaxing Will into taking slow swaying steps back towards the bed and its flung-back sheets. Wiping down Will's bare skin with the flannel to cool his fever slightly before towelling him as dry as Hannibal can get him without removing his clothing. Arranging Will's limbs to get Will back under the covers and lying down, his eyes still staring through Hannibal in the dark.

"Enfant terrible," Hannibal murmurs, and leans down to leave another kiss on Will's forehead.

Which tree bore the apples that fed this fire? The heat of Will's skin brands Hannibal's lips, a burning token to tide Hannibal over as he returns to the bathroom to ruthlessly scrub himself clean. Coming back to the bed and sliding in behind Will again only when he is wearing his pyjamas once more.

At last, again, Will's eyes are closed. The beat of his heart is steady against Hannibal's hand spread against his sternum, so Hannibal slides his hand down Will's torso, ribs under flesh giving way to the more vulnerable softness of Will's abdomen.

Here, beneath Hannibal's hand, are Will's stomach and intestines hard at work digesting their earlier meal, aided by Will's liver, his gallbladder and pancreas.

Here, beneath Hannibal's hand, is Will's bladder, slowly filling with urine as pregnancy delivers blood to Will's kidneys at a faster rate than Will is accustomed to.

Here, beneath Hannibal's hand, is Will's womb, its walls gradually expanding to accommodate the developing life growing inside of it - still embryonic at this stage, deep in the process of organogenesis. There is another tiny, tiny primitive heart beating beneath Hannibal's fingers, carrying half of Hannibal's DNA, another simple digestive system: the stomach before the soul. The buds of lungs, the systems for disposing of waste that will, for now, be passed into Will's bloodstream to deal with, and the very, very beginnings of a minuscule nerve-rich brain.

Each part is perfect, and precious. The whole is *priceless*, and to even *try* and conceive its entirety robs the air from Hannibal's lungs, his head bowed in brief, blinding worship to the bone of Will Graham's spine.

An embryo, a foetus, a baby, a *child.* Of his and Will's making. Divinity breathing life into dust.

The breadth of Hannibal's hand encompasses it all, in all its potentiality, and his body, Will Graham. Sleeping, burning, dreaming unaware.

Hannibal tucks one of Will's dark, damp curls back behind his ear, a gesture so delicate that considering it shudders emotion through Hannibal anew, returning his mouth to the altar of Will's nape, the scent of him. Smoke and spice, pines and air. A building fever. A growing pregnancy.

Beauty, chaos, destruction and creation.

Hannibal strokes whisper-soft against Will's belly with his thumb. Half crooning, "*Alouette, gentille Alouette. Alouette, je te plumerai.*"

Perhaps he weeps. Or perhaps Will's sweat catches heavy in the lashes of his eyes. Either way, the moisture is soaked up by the tangled sweep of Will's hair.

The black stag approaches from the woods, dark feathers rippling down its back. The never-rising, never-setting sun hums in the sky, the air thick and slow with the half-light, each slow steady thud of Will's heart in his chest.

Abigail struggles in his arms, her scent as sharp as the blade Will holds pressed against her throat. A knife of sunlight, the flowers bleeding and gasping as Abigail quivers and pushes back into her father's chest, trying to turn her head away from the edge.

"I'm sorry, Abigail."

She cannot go too far. Will holds her, grasp around her arm, mouth pressed to her ear, her temples, breathing in this last scent of his precious child, the last protection he can offer her from the world. She's scared - he didn't mean to scare her, doesn't want to hurt her - but he will be sure, make sure, that it will only hurt for a little while.

"Please just hold still. Please. I'm going to make it all go away."

The sun *whines.* Will slashes Abigail's throat, the splatter of hot red arterial blood spraying over his face, his arms, over the blue-gold-green grass that heaves underfoot.

The stag bolts -

And Will jerks awake, gasping, shuddering, to the screech of the alarm clock beside him. He has a moment's wild grace to recall exactly where he is before his stomach *heaves*, and Will has to all but fling himself out of the damp tangle of bedsheets still wrapped around him to make it to the nearby bathroom in time to deposit his stomach contents in the sink rather than on the motel room floor.

The alarm keeps screeching. Will heaves, and heaves again, until all the bile of his dreams has been brought up and he can bear to meet the eyes of his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He is pale and dark-slick with sweat all over, and, when he peels off the wet t-shirt he had gone to bed in, it hits the bathroom floor with a disgusting slap.

7.37 am. Will is alone in the motel room, and the morning sun *blares* through his brain when he staggers over to the curtains to fling them back and let in some light. Alarm off. More staggering - this time for the aspirin in Will's jacket pocket, two pills swallowed down with a palmful of metallic water from the kitchenette's tap. Gulping down another palmful to try and take the chalky *stick* of them from his throat, his mouth painfully dry.

Garret Jacob Hobbs stands in the motel room's open doorway, his features bloated with death. When he smiles at Will, triumphant, a stream of buzzing flies pours from his open mouth.

“Will?”

His hand lifts -

“Will,” Hannibal says more firmly, and the mirage of Garret Jacob Hobbs bleeds away to reveal the figure of Hannibal Lecter beneath, polystyrene cartons in his hands.

Something almost concerned in his expression, because Will is still half hunched-over the kitchenette’s sink and gaping at him. *Fuck.*

“Are you feeling unwell again?” Hannibal inquires, shutting the door and setting down the cartons before striding over to Will at the sink. His large hands sure and cool on Will’s aching forehead, slowing down how fast the world seems to be spinning. “Nausea?”

Will wants to collapse into him. Probably *would* collapse into Hannibal, if only he weren’t so keenly aware of just *how* much of a hot, bare, sweaty mess he is compared to Hannibal’s… everything. Already dressed for the day everything.

“Yeah, uh -” Will coughs, trying to clear some of the croak out of his throat. Not that he has anything he wants to *say.* “Yeah.”

“Food poisoning should not persist this long.” Hannibal’s hands slide to Will’s throat, urging Will to lift his chin as he moves and presses his fingers tenderly over the lymph nodes around Will’s face and neck. Around his scent glands, thumbs caressing the soft hollows behind Will’s ears.

Though the purpose is clinical, the touch is shockingly intimate. Will can feel himself flush, blood reddening his ears and sweeping down his throat. He keeps his eyes fixed on the mottled motel ceiling. Wills his cock not to chub up in his underwear, *please*.

“Perhaps you have a touch of the flu.”

“Maybe,” Will rasps, the vibrations of his words picked up by Hannibal’s fingertips. Small flickers of pleasure still stroking down his spine. “But I think you’re underestimating the powers of the Quantico chilli.”

“Does consuming chilli usually encourage you to sleepwalk for the next several days?”

“What?” Will rocks back, lifting his head and throat out of Hannibal’s hands to look at the other man straight on. Will would be embarrassed by the sheen of moisture he has left there, but confusion and alarm take priority over shame. “What do you- *sleepwalking?* ”

“Sleepwalking,” Hannibal placidly confirms. “Or somnambulism, if you’d prefer. I woke in the night to find that you’d left the bed and were standing in the middle of the room. Your eyes were open, but you were not awake.”

“Shit,” Will says. Has lifted a hand to pull at his own hair without even thinking about it, grounding himself with the sensation of pain tugging at his roots. What the hell does he say to *that?* “Sorry?”

“You need not apologise for something that cannot be helped.” Hannibal delicately nudges him to the side and begins washing his hands at the sink. Will’s sweat was noted, *great.* “Onset of sleepwalking in adulthood is less common than in children. Were you prone to sleepwalking as a child, Will?”

“No,” says Will. Then, “yes? I think I did it a few times when I was very young, but nothing regular.”

Hannibal hums, a single considering note. “Something to keep an eye on.”

“Alongside the flu?”

“Alongside the flu.”

Hannibal had returned to the diner they’d gone to the night before and brought them all back orange juice and pancakes for breakfast. (God knows what time he’d gotten up.) Alana and Abigail have already been delivered theirs; like Will, neither had been out of their pyjamas when Hannibal had turned up at their motel room door, and so have been left to consume their breakfast whilst it’s still hot in private half-dressed modesty.

Will appreciates that the temporary division of their group grants them *all* a little privacy, especially when, halfway through his first pancake, he has to make another queasy dash to the bathroom.

It’s shaping up to be the kind of day for watching vomit disappear down the plughole.

Marissa Schurr is found dead at the Hobbs’ hunting cabin, her body impaled on the racks of antlers on a wall upstairs. Spread out like a gift for the altar, still sluggishly dripping with blood into a congealing pool on the floor. Draining.

Very obviously not the work of Garret Jacob Hobbs, but a copycat again. *The* Copycat?

Alana takes Abigail outside as soon as the girl has finished screaming at the sight and has picked herself up from the ground enough for Alana to support her downstairs, away from the body of her friend. Already reeling from the realisation of her father’s - and her unwitting mother’s and her own - cannibalism, Marissa’s death has rapidly tipped Abigail over into shock.

Alana and the paramedics Will had called for will look after her for now.

The local police and ERT move in, ravens picking over the carrion. Jack Crawford won’t be far behind them; he’s already in the state, investigating the aggressive intruder who had yelled at Abigail and Marissa in the Hobbs’ backyard the day before.

Will stays with the body - and Hannibal. The points of the antlers around them seem to curl into their space in both protection and in threat, so Will keeps his head low as he examines the crime scene. Guarding his own neck, and tipping his chin only incrementally towards Hannibal on his left when he speaks.

“Do you think she knew the guy down by the stream?”

“Somebody’s brother?”

“Not somebody,” says Will. Frowning a little. Unlike the last body dropped by the Copycat Killer, Marissa Schurr had been left to bleed dry in her underwear. Why the sudden care for the dead girl’s modesty? “Abigail said he asked her if she helped her dad take his sister’s lungs while she was alive.”

“The young woman on the stag head,” Hannibal - correctly - surmises. Shifts his weight beside Will as though he is studying the scene in front of them anew.

“Cassie Boyle. Had an alpha brother. Nicholas. But Garret Jacob Hobbs didn’t kill Cassie Boyle.”

“I know,” says Hannibal. Will eyes him. “Garret Jacob Hobbs would have honoured every part of her.”

Blood and antlers reflect in Hannibal’s eyes as he studies the corpse - or maybe just the antlers. His eyes are so red, even in shadow, the blood might have already been there to start with.

The stomping creak of the stairs announces the arrival of Jack at last, his shoulders and jaw already tight with frustration. A waft of alpha pepper and patchouli, overwhelming the earth and ozone he’d brought in with him from outside.

“You bring Abigail Hobbs back to Minnesota to find out if she was involved with her father’s murders and another girl dies.”

Marissa’s lower lip is swollen, a trail of dried blood to her chin: an injury received prior to her death. Hit in the face.

Long since gloved up, Will carefully opens her mouth. Trying to focus on the body in front of him rather than Jack’s obvious fuming on his right. “He- ah- scraped his knuckle on her teeth.”

Hannibal leans in so close he almost puts his head on Will’s shoulder. For an instant, all Will can smell is the spicy amber gold of his cologne, the scent of it filling Will’s head with a honey-thick cloud.

“Ah, th- There’s foreign tissue and what could be trace amounts of blood.”

Jack holds onto his annoyance like a starved dog does with a bone. “You said that this Copycat was an intelligent psychopath, Will. That there would be no traceable motive. No patterns. He wouldn’t kill again this way, you said.”

“I may have been wrong about that,” Will says, annoyed at the reminder. It stings enough to be proven wrong *without* Jack suggesting that Will’s mistake might somehow have led to this girl’s death as well.

“Yes, because Garret Jacob Hobbs never struck his victims. Why would the Copycat do it?”

“I think he was provoked,” Hannibal says, and the warm gust of his breath blows over Will’s throat.

Will shivers - and then covers it up by pretending to stretch.

Hannibal lifts his head at last, finally looking at Jack. “Nicholas Boyle murdered this girl. And his own sister.”

Will cannot help but glance at Hannibal at that. Hannibal’s proposal is the simplest answer to their handful of problems, and an answer Will had been skirting around himself - but it all feels a bit *too* neat for Will’s comfort. Everything tied up pat even when something inside of it’s still leaking.

And Hannibal is suggesting it very quickly.

If Nicholas Boyle had killed his sister, why would he have confronted Abigail for it? And so angrily? Had he been upset at being spotted so easily as a copycat, and tried once more to pass off his crime as one of the Shrike’s?

“With or without Abigail Hobbs?” Jack asks. Still determined to find Abigail guilty.

“Without,” Will says at once, his voice utterly flat. His head is aching again, a low throb of pain over his eye.

“Well do you think Abigail Hobbs knew Nicholas or Cassie Boyle?”

“No.”

Jack finally comes closer, pressing his point with proximity and the ever-strengthening spread of his alpha scent. “You don’t think she knew them, or don’t *wanna* think she knew them?”

Will glances to Hannibal again, seeking his support - they *both* know Jack is more likely to listen to the beta doctor than him. “She said she didn’t know them.”

Hannibal, obligingly, notes Will’s glance and stares Jack down, his lips beautifully, disapprovingly pursed.

Jack halts. And sighs. “Dr. Bloom says that Abigail has- ah- a penchant for manipulation. Is she manipulating you, Will?”

“Agent Crawford,” Hannibal says. A quiet reproof.

“Look,” Jack starts defensively, “he said he was wrong about the Copycat Killer.” Tilting his head back to Will, his tone turning accusing: “I wanna know what *else* he's wrong about.”

Will sighs, steeling himself for the necessary confrontation. “Whoever killed the girl in the field, killed this girl.” He looks at Jack sharply, meeting the stinging accusations head-on. “I’m right about that. He knew *exactly* how to mount the body. Wound patterns are almost identical to Cassie Boyle. The same design, the same... humiliation.”

Except Marissa Schurr had been allowed to keep some of her clothing on her. For whose sake had *that* been?

Jack moves his jaw as he thinks, metaphorically chewing on the facts.

“Abigail Hobbs is not a killer,” Hannibal says firmly, the last nail in the coffin. “But she could be the target of one.”

Jack nods, accepting Hannibal’s assessment for now - and then promptly, politely, boots Hannibal out of the cabin. Off to pick up Abigail and Alana, and get the former out of Minnesota *tout de suite.* Away from harm. (Away from causing any further trouble.)

Will is required to stay and - further - examine the corpse.

Hannibal cannot argue with such a reasonable request so politely worded, though he does spare Will a brief commiserate glance before he departs: a shared, precise understanding that Jack has just, quite deliberately, removed Will from his back-up.

Jack, like the rest of humanity, does not appreciate having his theories shot down.

Will grits his teeth, wills his headache to just *fuck off already,* and goes back to examining the dead.

The media has already gotten wind of the corpse found at the Hobbs’ cabin, and the flash of their many cameras breaks between the red and blue lights of the police cars maintaining a new barricade outside the Hobbs’ house. Garish and American in the encroaching dark, the circus colours in red, white and blue. Yelling questions as soon as Hannibal, Alana and Abigail appear in their rental car, a wall of noise that slaps them all in the face the moment they open the car doors to set foot on the drive.

Abigail’s name features prominently in their cries. Queries about cannibalism. Her knowledge thereof.

Abigail is trembling like a dragonfly in her teal coat as she walks, even with Alana’s hand supporting her spine. She will be all the better for this experience, someday, or the overall picture will be better for her removal from it.

A stray woman manages to break through the police line, a policeman utterly failing to grab hold of her before she’s already on the drive. “You- You killed my *daughter!”*

Marissa Schurr’s mother. The camera flashes grow faster.

Abigail turns at the familiar voice - she has to know this woman well, the mother of her neighbour and closest friend -, but Alana sensibly grabs her and pulls her back before Abigail can risk herself by approaching the woman so clearly torn apart by grief.

She is omega, like her daughter had presented, though not as spirited, and the cherries of her scent have now all gone to ash. Her face a mask of woe. Steps stumbling, and eyes blind with tears. Her hands turned into claws to rend both clothing and hair.

Hannibal steps between her and Abigail before those hands can reach the worried girl, his grip firm on the Schurr woman's arms even as she dissolves against his shoulder, wailing.

"Why come back? Why did you come back here? *Why come back?"*

Lost at the sight of suffering, still suffering herself, Abigail has no answer for her.

The Schurr woman can barely stand, sliding down in Hannibal's arms. Having failed to protect her child from danger, she is unable now to even take care of herself. A protector of no-one.

The world is not kind to those who are not strong enough to bear it, and Abigail requires a better, stronger, and more resilient role model than *this* as her mother figure.

Hannibal is more than content to relieve himself of his burden when both Alana and an errant policeman step in, easing the weeping woman into their more sympathetic care. Starting the process by which the Schurr woman will either start to move on from her loss, or be consumed by it.

Alana returns after a few moments, going immediately back to Abigail's side. The young omega's trembling is even worse now, her eyes suspiciously bright where they are caught by the strobing lights of the police cars.

Freddie Lounds steps out of the shadows before they can reach the house. Her red hair is a flame in the darkness.

"Abigail."

Another annoyance. Alana is already waving over another police officer.

"Ms. Lounds," says Hannibal, unimpressed by the lax security measures of the local police force, "you're on the wrong side of the police line."

Lounds spares him a glance before the officer arrives to take her elbow. "I've been covering the Minnesota Shrike long before you got involved." Craning her neck around Hannibal's torso to look at Abigail even as Hannibal and the officer begin escorting her back to the other side of the police line. "I want to help you tell your story! You need me now more than ever."

"So you can write more *lies* about me?" Abigail calls back before Alana can shush her, her young voice carrying through the evening air. Cameras keep flashing. "*Birds of a Feather?* Marissa- Marissa *told me-!"*

What exactly Marissa told Abigail is promptly hushed by Alana's rapid whispered instructions to Abigail - the press are listening, after all, and all too willing to twist Abigail's words -, sending Abigail into the house before any more can be said.

Will had been right to be concerned about what secrets Marissa might spill to Abigail when they had let the two girls go out alone together into the Hobbs' backyard.

A very unimpressed Alana heads off to give the officer in charge of maintaining the police line her opinion on how well they are handling their task.

"I'm not the only one lurking about the Hobbs house peeking in windows," Lounds says, something of a bounce to her step as Hannibal and the police officer walk her back to the police line and the eager crowd on the other side of it. Apparently unperturbed by Abigail's rejection of her offer. *I know something you don't know.* Smiling with perfected annoying sweetness at the officer still holding her arm: "You really should monitor those police lines more carefully."

Hannibal gestures to allow the rather fed-up-looking officer to leave. His services are no longer required where Freddie Lounds is concerned; the sharp and petite alpha is clearly more interested in barter than brawling. Her scent still ripe and rich with that smug ylang-ylang that Will so loathes.

"Have you seen a young man?" Hannibal asks her, because Lounds evidently wishes to be asked. "Alpha, mid-20s, ginger hair? Unwashed."

Lounds lifts her chin and smiles. "Tell you if I saw him if you tell me why it's important."

There is something almost admirable in her brazen cheek. It turns out that she has, however, glimpsed someone lurking in the woods around the Hobbs' home that *could* fit Hannibal's description to her of Nicholas Boyle, which means that Hannibal needs to return indoors in case the young man shows himself.

In the house of cards Hannibal is currently building, Nicholas Boyle is an unwitting card supporting the base. He needs to be fixed in place before his wavering causes the walls he supports to come tumbling down.

Hannibal retrieves Alana, and the two of them leave the flashing lights and ever-growing darkness to head back inside the Hobbs' house. Alana moves ahead as Hannibal shuts the door behind them, already calling out for Abigail as she turns towards the kitchen.

Too busy calling out for Abigail, it seems, to taste how the air inside the house is scented heavily with fresh, sweet wet iron: *blood.* A great deal of it.

Behind Alana in the foyer, Hannibal sees Abigail turn the corner on the stairs leading up from the living room. Abigail's face is distant, pale and stained with drying tears, and her hands are held out before her like Lady Macbeth's nightmares: covered in thick splashes of crimson blood.

All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten those little hands; *oh, Abigail.*

“Abigail?” Alana calls again, having missed the girl rising up the stairs beside them, beginning to look a little worried at the pressing silence in the house. If she turns her head even half an inch to her right, she’ll see Abigail. And Abigail’s bloody hands.

One long smooth step swallows up the distance between Hannibal and Alana, and half a breath more has Alana’s head cupped into the curve of Hannibal’s hand and slammed into the stone wall beside them.

Alana crumples, unconscious even before Hannibal has gently brought her down to the floor.

“She’ll be alright,” he tells Abigail, seeing the way the girl’s eyes have flown wide - still in too much of a state of shock to scream. Frozen on the stairs. Good. “Abigail. Show me what happened.”

Abigail leads the way back downstairs, still holding her hands out in front of her, traumatised by the blood on them. Hannibal would usually do something about that for her, but, in this case, it means Abigail is not leaving forensic evidence of her actions all over the house.

Nicholas Boyle lies dead - disembowelled - in the living room downstairs. Blood spreading in a slow pool around the corpse, bloody knife beside him on the wooden floor.

Oh, *Abigail.* It’s beautifully done, but the timing is a little inconvenient.

“He was going to kill me,” Abigail says plaintively. Staring at her work. Her tears and trembling have stopped.

“Was he?” Hannibal asks her solemnly - before lowering himself into a crouch on the floor, careful to avoid the spreading pool of blood as he examines Abigail’s work. Abigail sinks into a kneel beside him.

Nicholas Boyle has been gutted like a deer, sternum to bowels. The cut is mostly clean, his entrails spilling whole out of the devastating wound. A good job for a hunter’s daughter, *daddy’s little girl.*

Since Will has already attached himself to her so, Hannibal had thought to give Will the gift of Abigail as a daughter, one child in return for another. Binding Abigail more closely to Will - as well as Hannibal himself - by trimming away the last clinging pieces of her old life and giving her nothing else to clutch onto but themselves.

It seems that Abigail, however unintentionally, is not unwilling to put in the effort required to see Hannibal’s plans come to fruition on her part. This death distances her even more from the little girl she used to be, and - not-so-neatly - ties up one of Hannibal’s loose ends as well.

The neatening is the most important part. Hannibal can encourage people to the edge of change, but they must enact that change in themselves *for* themselves. Choose to make the decisions right for them in the aftermath.

“This isn’t self-defence, Abigail,” Hannibal says gently, kindly. Safe harbour in a storm. “You butchered him.”

Abigail's omega scent spikes with stress and she starts to shake her head, but her neck is still too stiff with shock to follow it through. She still can't look away from the body she had put on the floor. "I didn't…"

"They will see what you did and they'll see you as an accessory to the crimes of your father."

"I wasn't."

Perhaps she had been. Perhaps she hadn't. Either way, Abigail seems to have operated in a grey enough area in regards to her actions under her father that the general public, if not eventually the FBI and justice system, will see it as black.

Abigail is *terrified* of that possibility, and, in that terror, opportunity waits.

"I can help you," Hannibal tells her, keeping his tone even but kind. Abigail must see him as being dependable in this situation, free of judgement. "If you ask me to. At great risk to my career and my life."

Abigail finally looks away from the corpse, to Hannibal - confusion finally sinking in past her shell of shock. Help her *how?* She is a young omega still; she wants protection and an adult to make all the hard decisions for her right now, to make all the bad things go away.

"You have a choice," Hannibal tells her simply, and holds her eyes with his own until some of their blankness fills with his words. "You can tell them you were defending yourself when you gutted this man -" something that Hannibal has been careful to already impress upon Abigail will *not* make a good story - "or… we can hide the body."

Hannibal watches as Abigail's fears struggle with the morals society has imposed upon her, a battleground in the wide blue roundness of her eyes. Both still a darling child and a smart young woman - she emotes almost as beautifully as Will does, gold ringing her irises as her body rises unwillingly out of its protective state of shock and debates whether to engage its fight or flight response.

Hannibal reaches out to her, and touches his wrist to her cheek, his fingers light to her temple. Almost a scent-mark, enough of a reassurance to steady her. "Abigail."

She needs to decide. Take that last step on her own, so that her mind assigns any blame it might later find for this moment to her own person rather than Hannibal's.

Abigail swallows. And nods. "Help me hide it. Please."

If Will keeps helping Jack with cases, sooner or later, he's going to become acquainted with most of the ambulance crews that operate in the northern states.

It's nice not to be the one being fussed over by stubborn paramedics for a change, but Will is still deeply unhappy about *Alana* requiring the fussing instead. Alana, who might not have needed to be checked over by paramedics had Will been with her, Abigail and Hannibal in the Hobbs' house rather than stuck with a dead body - beyond all help - out in a cold (creepy) cabin in the woods.

Hannibal had declined medical care, despite the lump growing on his head. Abigail had needed nothing more than a cup of hot tea and a shock blanket, and to get away from the shithole that used to be her home.

The bald ambulance lights are driving nails through Will's skull. He turns his back on them and Alana getting the bandage on her head checked over one more time, sitting on the floor of the ambulance with his legs hanging out of the open back doors.

It doesn't do anything about Jack's - too loud - voice interrogating Alana about events to his left, but it does do something about the light. Less of a gleam off the weave of Jack's shirt as well. Less of a reminder that Will *should have been with the others at the house.*

"I don't remember anything," Alana says. For the second time. Jack likes to confirm things. "Maybe a blur out of the corner of my eye, then a big, fat cut to black."

The crowd - apparently, unsurprisingly, there had been a crowd earlier - around the Hobbs house has mostly dispersed now, though the manned police line still lingers. The media circus disappeared shortly after Abigail, and the night fell black and quiet.

Jack finally relents enough to give Alana the details. "Nicholas Boyle attacked Abigail. You. Struck Lecter across the back of head with a fireplace poker."

Even with his back to her, Will can hear Alana's indrawn breath. "W-well, where's Abigail?"

"Lecter took her back to the hotel," Will says. He's spent too long with Jack today; he can taste the shape of Jack's speech in his own mouth, pushing out against his teeth from the inside.

"She scratched Nicholas Boyle on his way out the back door," says Jack. One little victory in this sad sorry affair. "The blood on her hand matches the tissue we pulled from Marissa Schurr's mouth."

The simplest answer, neatly - almost *politely* - presenting itself. Will doesn't like it.

Alana glances in confusion between Will and Jack, her world still spinning a little fast around the edges. "Then what, he- he got away?"

Nicholas Boyle should *not* have gotten away. Three civilians, one high at-risk… they should've had *some* kind of escort with them, if Will *absolutely* could not have been spared. (Will could have been spared. He'd achieved nothing further at the cabin for another hour or so spent hovering around Marissa Schurr's corpse apart from a deepening headache.)

"We'll catch him one way or another," says Jack.

Will sighs sharply through his nose, and clambers out of the ambulance. Sick of the lights, and sick of the conversation. His head *throbs* with pain.

Jack still deigns to ask him the obvious. “Where’re you going?” Not accusing, for once.

Will misses his dogs, and there is nothing more for him to do here. “I want to go home, Jack.”

After popping some aspirin, Will’s first stop has to be the motel to pack up and pick up his stuff. He finds his bags, however, have already been packed for him, and Hannibal’s belongings are missing entirely.

A few doors down, light shines through the window of what had been Alana and Abigail’s room, so Will hauls his luggage down there and knocks on the door.

After a few seconds pause, Hannibal answers the door. The immediate slow spread of his smile when he sees Will does more for Will’s headache than the aspirin had, a tight band of stress falling away from Will’s shoulders.

Hannibal looks soft now; his blazer removed, red zip-neck sweater soaking up the light and bleeding back a warmth Will can feel in his lungs. “Will.”

“Hey,” Will says, and tiredly approximates something like a smile back at him. “Thought you were heading for the airport?”

“We will need to leave for our flight in half an hour,” Hannibal says, stepping back to allow Will to trudge forwards into the quiet warmth of the motel room with his things and nodding over to the beds behind him. “Until then, I thought it better for Abigail to get some rest.”

Clearly emotionally exhausted by the day’s events, Abigail is asleep on one of the beds. Curled up tight around the stuffed rabbit she had taken from her room, her chest rising and falling with the gentle, healing evenness of slumber. Unharmed. (Physically, at least.) The room smells like a wet forest, blackberries and tears.

Another heap of stress sloughs off Will’s shoulders though his heart still aches, and he allows his legs to fold, his knees giving out on him and collapsing him into a seat on the spare bed. He could do with a rest himself. For a *year.*

“She’s lost her mother, her father, her home, her reputation, and now her best friend,” Will says carefully, quietly, reserving all the tact for his words rather than his motions. Tracking Hannibal as the other man crosses the room to sit down beside him. *A nap ain’t gonna cut it.*

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Hannibal shifts, matching Will’s tone and volume, his shoulder bumping against Will’s. Their weights slide together on the mattress, and the heat of his body makes Will just want to press up against his side. “Sometimes that step is into bed.”

Well - true. Will nudges Hannibal’s shoulder back. “And you. How’s the bump?”

Hannibal's lips quirk at Will's casualness, laughter creasing the corners of his eyes. He's the happiest victim of a fire poker Will has ever met. "Perhaps you should tell me."

Hannibal dips his head down low, a clear invitation for Will to reach up and trace the edges of the new egg-shaped bump that has erupted on his upper skull, courtesy of one well-swung fire poker, with his fingertips. The colours of bruising are already coming in fantastically under the shiny drifts of Hannibal's gold-and-salt hair, but the blow doesn't seem to have broken skin. (A tentative swing?)

"Well, you probably won't be hatching any chickens any time soon," Will offers, gently smoothing the strands of hair he'd disturbed back into place. Wary of the sensitive bump blooming beneath. "Maybe a chickadee?"

"I had aspirations for the second coming of Athena, though I suppose a songbird might suffice." Hannibal reaches up to take Will's questing hand with his own before Will can remove it, pressing Will's startled knuckles against the warmth of his lips. "How is our dear Alana?"

"Uh -" Will's fingers twitch with his confusion, but Hannibal has already released him. What-? "Your birdies may get to learn a duet. She's got to stay in the state a little longer, for observation. Think I can steal her ticket home?"

"I'm sure it can be arranged." Hannibal rises to fetch his blazer - and his phone. Starting said arrangements and saving Will the job of negotiating with the airline staff at the booking/check-in desk.

If Will weren't so tired and his head didn't hurt, if there weren't time constraints and if Abigail weren't in the room, Will would offer Hannibal another blowjob just for that. Even with the light of Hannibal's phone screen giving Hannibal an artificial double-chin.

"You'll be getting home rather late tonight."

Will shrugs. "My home looks better at night. You've seen it."

"I have. Lit up like a sanctuary in the wilderness, calling weary pilgrims to rest."

Will pauses at that. He's- Will is not used to sharing the sight of his home with others. It's second nature for him to stop on the edge of the woods on his property when returning from a night-time walk with his dogs, basking in the sight of *home.* It hadn't mattered that Hannibal had been there to see it when he'd come over for dinner - and sex - at the beginning of the month, only that Hannibal had not disturbed the peace of that moment. Had stopped and seen Will's home *with* Will - and apparently *actually seen it.* The way Will saw it, or something very close.

"...Sometimes at night," Will offers even more quietly than before, mindful of the still sleeping Abigail in the room with them, "I leave the lights on in my little house and walk across the flat fields. When I look back from a distance, the house is like a boat at sea."

Hannibal lowers his phone. Listening intently, as though there really is nothing else in the world he'd prefer to do. Nowhere else he'd prefer to be.

Will has to swallow past the lump in his throat before he can speak again. "It's really the only time I feel safe."

"...From the outside," Hannibal asks a few moments, when it has become clear Will has finished speaking, "looking in?"

Perhaps that's part of it, but it's not the part holding together the core.

"Like I can hold everything that matters to me," Will says, his hands open and uplifted across his lap, catching the fall of the overhead lights in the hollow cups of his palms, "all at once. It's safe. And it glows."

Hannibal's Monday is a busy one. He had decided against rearranging that day's appointments at his practice, and so must balance his patients with his social duties (graciously responding to a few general society invitations and solicitously inquiring after Alana and Abigail's health) and the FBI's polite request for him to submit a written report with his view of the weekend's occurrences. The only time his phones seem to stop ringing is when he is in session with a patient, and so it is only when night falls that Hannibal truly finds a long stretch of time to himself. Relaxing in the dim quiet sanctum of his office, at his desk, trying to put his visions of Will as the wandering Prince of Sleep to paper.

He has just turned his thoughts to which species of poppy to use in Will's crown when his previously silent visitor finally chooses to announce herself, the scent of wild woods and wilder blackberries having gently spilled out into the air ever since her entrance through the upper door of Hannibal's office approximately ten minutes past.

A floorboard on the mezzanine creaks, and Hannibal sets down his pencil.

"Hello, Abigail."

"How did you know it was me?" Abigail calls back down to him, her nerves jangling in her tone.

For all she's been through, Abigail is still in many ways such a dear, *naïve* child.

"Your scent, Abigail. And the hospital called." Hannibal rises from his desk, moving easily into the centre of the room. Looking up at last at the pale-faced Abigail on his mezzanine - another skittish omega in Hannibal's life now, it seems, who is drawn to the heights. Their

querencia in the ring of life, from which they may gather strength before their charge. “You climbed over the wall. Where else were you to go? Home is no longer an option.”

Abigail bites her lip, hurt at the reminder. Still worried.

Hannibal tips his head towards the office ladder. Friendly. “Come down from there.”

Hesitantly, Abigail indulges him. She takes Hannibal’s offered hand to balance her on the last few rungs as she steps down to the floor - and then immediately drops it when she gets there, walking away from Hannibal just half a beat too quickly to be natural. She’s still worried. About Hannibal.

One night away from Hannibal’s influence and the thoughts have already been turning in Abigail’s mind. Few of them kind. Only some of them useful to Hannibal.

“I don’t want to go to sleep.”

“You can’t anticipate your dreams,” Hannibal says, keeping his pace calm and even as he moves to stand in front of Abigail. He does not, at this moment, want to frighten her any further; they share two secrets now, and Abigail needs to believe, for her own sake, that Hannibal can be trusted with them. “Can’t block them, can’t repress. A hostage to your memories and imagination.”

Abigail swallows. “I didn’t honour any part of him. So it’s just -” she gestures, hands open like they are still dripping with blood, at her belly: the place where Nicholas Boyle’s insides started to tumble out. No need to specify the identity of the *him* - “murder, isn’t it?”

“Most would argue self-defence.”

“Then why not tell the truth?” *Why did you suggest we lie?*

“*Most* would argue. There would still be those who would say you were taking after your father.”

Abigail flinches. Takes a breath, then, “They’re already saying that though, aren’t they?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer her. Judging by the blaze of Abigail’s eyes, gold flashing around the edges of her irises as she determinedly lifts her chin, the question had been rhetorical.

“Dr. Bloom would say that the opinions of the general public don’t matter. That I don’t need to be loved by everyone. That I need to begin with loving myself.”

“Were Dr. Bloom to say that, she would not be wholly incorrect,” Hannibal says. Resting his weight back on his heels to regard the young, hurting omega girl before him. He has decided now: the piquant note in Abigail’s scent *is* elemi. “But then, to the best of my knowledge, although she may have faced discrimination in some aspects of her life, Dr. Bloom has also never been the target of a public hate-campaign.”

“What would *you* say?”

There it is again, Abigail's flash of temper. Hannibal remembers its kind well from his own days of youth, righteous fury memorised in the corners of his mind on the cobblestones of Paris.

Those stones are weathered now, and tarmacked over.

Like this, unguided, Abigail might unwisely decide to confront the world.

Hannibal ponders that, then, "I would say that I am not Dr. Bloom."

"...You're glad I killed him," Abigail realises at last. The gold keeps spiking in her eyes then retreating, the colour as unsure as the rest of the girl what her response should be to Hannibal. Fight? Flight? Further furtive conspiracy?

"What would be the alternative? That he killed you?"

"I don't know if he was going to."

"No," Hannibal agrees, "you don't." And Abigail never will.

Her lips wobble - and then she lashes out. (Fight.) "*You're* the one who called the house. You talked to my dad before... W-What did you say to him?"

"A simple conversation, ascertaining if he was home for an interview." Abigail frowns, seeing the immediate flaw in that explanation. "Then why not tell the truth?"

"They… they think whoever called the house was a serial killer. Just like my dad."

"I'm nothing like your dad," Hannibal says, a simple truth. And then, appealing to an even simpler emotion: "I made a mistake, Abigail. Something easily misconstrued, not unlike yourself."

Hannibal lets his words sink in, watching the empathy bloom behind Abigail's blue-gold-*blue* gaze. Her expression loosens, sensing a fellow sufferer, softening some of its sharper edges, losing its pinch.

"I'll keep your secret," Hannibal says when Abigail's scent loses its edge as well, hay and blackberries and fir sweeter than the elemi's pointed note.

Abigail nods, feeling all the power Hannibal currently wishes her to. "And I'll keep yours."

One more binding between them, and one more point that tips Abigail's trust towards Hannibal - and Will - more than anyone else. Complicity.

How pleasing it is when people walk into these cages themselves.

Once more, Hannibal offers Abigail his hand. An escort, first, to the seats, and then onwards, to the future they now still might share. "No more climbing walls, Abigail."

Chapter End Notes

Blanquette: (a diminutive of French *blanc*, meaning ‘white’) a white stew/ragoût made from meat that has not been browned or fried, cooked and served in a white sauce. Usually refers to stews made of veal (most common), lamb, or chicken, but blanquettes can also be made with white fish or vegetables. Traditionally all the ingredients are white: veal, baby onions, button mushrooms, white wine, and crème fraîche.

Queen Mythra’s wilis are from the ballet *Giselle*.
The Prince of Sleep comes from Walter de la Mare’s *I Met at Eve*, which Hannibal paraphrases excerpts from.
All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, Oh, Oh! - William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 1

croquembouche

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal takes some time to process his emotions about recent revelations. Will contemplates the heart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Treated with care and regular icings, the lump/bruise on Hannibal's head politely recedes in time for him to attend the Baltimore Concert Opera's performance of *Norma* and annual silent auction the week before Thanksgiving without calling an unusual amount of attention to himself.

Even in shock, Abigail had taken Hannibal's instruction wonderfully, and the damage he had directed her to inflict on him with a fire poker had been the perfect amount to lend credence to their story without greatly impairing Hannibal's physical abilities - or his general appearance. A little pain and an increased tendency towards headaches for a few days had been worth it to buy Abigail's goodwill and silence, and Will's later tender concern for Hannibal's injury had been gratifying. Prompted by perceived suffering into peeling back the protective layers of his skin of his own accord, revealing the sweet pink rawness of his insides like the Lindworm prince on his wedding night to the last of his brides. A dear thing, unknowing still of the dangers of whips and lye.

The theatre of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion is aglow that Friday night, and the BCO performers - as artists-in-residence - its brightest lights. For all *Norma* is only a two-act opera its titular role is considered to be amongst the most taxing of parts to be played by any soprano, and the rest of the cast must follow and complement her lead. The role of Bellini's Druid High-Priestess demands great vocal control and flexibility from her performer whilst portraying a vast swathe of high and ever-shifting emotions - and the BCO's soprano plays her beautifully, a delight to both ears and eyes with her soaring voice and pale, glittering gown.

After the auction - and Hannibal's winning bid for the two-hour services of a pianist, promptly donated to the hostess of a charity bruncheon he has agreed to attend the following weekend (in an effort to spare himself from the omega woman's usual - poor - taste in musicians) -, both audience and performers mingle. Baltimore's very own Engineers' Club calls the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion in Mount Vernon their home, and the crowd that night is a mix of club members, their friends and family, and the more business and artistically-minded of the general public. Networking abounds, opportunities arising by 'chance' for both career and social advancement.

Hannibal, much to his private resignation, finds himself confronted with a quick succession of pushy society mamas overly desperate to press the accomplishments of their offspring - tonight, primarily beta daughters - upon him in the hopes he might put a ring on the finger of one of them. The opinions - and *age* - of the young women in question hardly seem to matter to their mothers; the last young lady Hannibal finds himself abruptly presented with before managing to sidle free of the matchmakers' clutches is a consternated twenty year-old called Anna - barely any older than Abigail and clearly deeply uncomfortable in a (likely borrowed) Christian Dior gown from the Spring collection that year.

Hannibal gallantly sweeps the girl away with him on his escape into the rest of the crowds. Anna makes a good shield against further matchmaking attempts that night, and no-one deserves to be subjected to the increasingly unsubtle wiles of her mother at much length. After hearing of the young lady's interest and studies in architecture and interior design at university, and because Anna has the grace - and self-awareness - to apologise for her mother's brash behaviour towards him, Hannibal swiftly finds his acquaintances, the Thorpe-Winterchilds, in the people around them and makes the necessary introductions.

Lucien Thorpe-Winterchild is an interior designer specialising in children's rooms and nurseries, mother to two young children of his own. He and his husband/mate are pleased to be able to thank Hannibal in person for the recent gift Hannibal had sent their youngest (upon the momentous occasion of Felix Thorpe-Winterchild's third birthday), and Lucien takes well to Anna and her awed interest whilst Hannibal avails himself of another flute of champagne from a passing server.

"I believe the young lady's mother was hoping for a romantic entanglement rather than an internship," one of Hannibal's more intimate acquaintances, Ellen Komeda, murmurs from beside Hannibal. The red lipsticked curve of her smile is discreetly hidden behind the rim of her own glass, but nothing disguises the uniquely bold camphor-tuberose of her alpha scent, its spicy musk heavy at the moment with her amusement. "Regardless of how lovely it is to see someone advancing by their own merit. And a little bit of luck, of course."

Hannibal smiles at the slight alpha woman, gesturing minutely with his champagne at the still-animated Lucien and Anna. Lucien has been searching for an inspired protégé/e, and Anna's bright-eyed enthusiasm and intelligent remarks seem to be earning her his attention. "The right time, the right place…"

"The right disinterested suitor?" Ellen laughs at Hannibal's roguish little wink and shrug, and heads swivel all over the room to gawk at the both of them. Were Ellen a little younger - or, perhaps, were *Hannibal* a little younger, going by Ellen's taste for young, pretty men as her companions regardless of their dynamic -, tongues would be wagging for days. "Hannibal, you know their efforts will not cease until they see you and your wallet married off to a nice beta girl."

"And should my heart lead me outside that demographic?" Hannibal inquires gamely, well aware the question itself is a tease. The suggestion that the eternal - coveted - bachelor Dr. Lecter has found a serious romance at last will fuel the gossip mill for weeks.

Ellen knows it too; her eyes gleam at him, amused and reproachful both. "Then I do hope that your heart leads you wisely. It would be very cruel, you know, to bring a mouse into a den of

vipers.” She tilts her head at him then suddenly, almost birdlike in her scrutiny. “...Not that I believe you have ever courted a mousy personality in your life, Hannibal. You’re far too catty.”

Hannibal huffs a laugh into his next mouthful of champagne. It seems Ellen has seen a little more of him than most of their shared social circle. “A cat amongst snakes? I could almost feel sorry for myself.”

“I didn’t say what *kind* of cat,” she scolds. “You could be a panther.”

“Or a tabby.” Still pleasant, Hannibal shows her his teeth. “I’ve been told I’m remarkably domestic.”

“Hardly domesti*cated.* ” Ellen pats him amiably on the arm, taking any insult out of her words - not that Hannibal has found any - with her friendly, knowing concern. “But, really, Hannibal. Do have a mind for the vipers. They hiss.”

“There’s a particular mongoose I expect to introduce you to at some point in the future,” Hannibal tells her conspiratorially, continuing to smile as Ellen gasps theatrically beside him - and has heads swivelling in their direction all over again.

Baltimore society will, at some point, have to be made aware of - and *respect* - Will Graham as a remarkable entity in himself and as the mother of Hannibal’s child, and, on that day, Hannibal will take great delight in setting the mongoose on all the vipers, the cat amongst the pigeons. Until then -

Hannibal sips his champagne and refuses to say any more on the topic despite all the curious staring in his direction, turning his and his little circle’s attention firmly to the talented soprano who has just joined their company. Still beaming from her performance, and rightly so.

The night tastes like opportunity and champagne.

The Observatory - or, as it is more commonly known (due to its architectural theme of ‘oriental-esque Victoriana’), the Patterson Park Pagoda - in Patterson Park, Baltimore, is open to the general public from noon until 6pm on Sundays from mid-April through mid-October. Completed in 1892, the Pagoda sits prettily atop Hampstead Hill - offering stunning views from the top of downtown Baltimore, the Patapsco River, the Key Bridge and Fort McHenry - and today serves as the backdrop and location of many of Patterson Park’s community events. The Pagoda is both a beloved icon of the park, and, since 1971, a designated historic landmark of Baltimore City.

“I’d rather visit the dog park,” Will tells Jimmy Price after the other omega has finished unloading all of this information on him, both of them standing at the base of the Pagoda’s narrow circular stairs with a few others and waiting for their turn to go up them. Weak Saturday morning sunlight spills in through the tower’s open door and walls of windows, filling the air with a very tired kind of gold to complement the flapping yellow police cordons outside. The murmur of their colleagues and general gawkers. “There’s a dog park here, right?”

“You’re optimistic if you think any of us are going to have enough free time to go to a *dog park*,” Zeller says from beside them with almost audible scorn - scowling when Will and Price both turn to *look* at him and glancing down at the camera slung around his neck again.

Choosing to be the bigger person, Will minds his tongue. Beverly had texted him a warning before Will had arrived on the scene: Zeller has been in a rotten mood for a few days now. Either his girlfriend had broken up with him or him her - Zeller isn’t saying, but, either way, Zeller has recently parted from his partner *very* non-amicably.

Will’s mood is hardly any better. He’d woken up on the floor amongst his dogs that morning with no idea how he’d gotten there after tucking himself into his bed last night, and Jack’s phonecall an hour or so later had thoroughly wrecked any of Will’s plans for the beginning of his weekend. He’d wanted to go fishing.

“No rest for the wicked,” Price sighs as yet *another* grim-faced technician trundles down the Pagoda stairs and past them to convene outside, and God, if that isn’t the motto of the day. “But better this weekend than next, I suppose. I’ve got a two-day meet-up with the family.”

Zeller eyes him dubiously. “You think the Chesapeake Ripper wants to keep his schedule free for the Black Friday sales?”

“*If* it’s the Ripper,” says Will.

It has been two whole years since the infamous serial killer known as the Chesapeake Ripper last - officially - struck and dropped two dead bodies and a missing FBI trainee around the Chesapeake Bay. Though a fair number of copycats have sprung up over the years of his activity, the Ripper’s work is usually distinct and easily identifiable: the Ripper kills in cycles of three and stages the bodies of his victims with great surgical skill and stylish brutality. Victims have their organs removed and taken as trophies, and the crime scenes are wiped of all incriminating evidence.

With the Ripper still unknown and at large, and the FBI no closer to catching him than they had been after his first victim had been discovered in Annapolis, the general public and some of the higher-ups in the Bureau - i.e, *Jack* - are inclined to see the Ripper in every particularly grisly homicide. No-one knows when - or *if* - the Ripper will strike again, so, until the killer is caught, every homicide discovered in the approximate DMV area that appears to display even a hint of theatricality and surgical knowledge is assumed to be the Chesapeake Ripper until proven otherwise.

This is going to be the first - alleged - Ripper scene that Will will see in person, although he teaches the case files of a handful of the Ripper’s copycats as part of his standard class

curriculum.

“It’s the Ripper,” Zeller insists, just as Price chimes in with:

“What, you don’t think serial killers like discounts? Who doesn’t like a bargain?”

“Our unsub’s an early bird, whoever they are,” says Beverly, descending the now otherwise empty Pagoda stairs just in time to break up their squabble and beckon them upstairs again after her. She apparently lives closer to the park than the rest of them and so had been dragged straight up the tower with Jack upon arrival (lucky *her*). “The scene was called in at 6.30 this morning, and it looks like it was set up at least a couple of hours before that.”

“Who called it in?” Will asks, the first one on Beverly’s heels as Price and Zeller have equipment to grab before they can move. “I thought the building was closed for the season.”

“One of the staff volunteers. The building still needs regular maintenance checks and the occasional cleaning even when it’s closed - and it seems like one of the cleaners likes to bring the omega he’s courting up here every other weekend to eat a picnic and watch the sunrise over the city.”

“Very romantic,” Price says approvingly - annoyingly unwinded by the trek up the stairs even with a heavy box in his arms.

It’s not a very tall building, but the tight curve of the stairs and constant flash of sun in his eyes is stealing Will’s breath away out of sheer dizziness. Light refracts in rainbows through stained glass windows and the lenses of his glasses, a technicolour swirl.

“Yeah,” Beverly agrees as they approach the top of the tower, the smoky amber and vanilla notes of her scent subdued by the early start and the scene awaiting them. “Only this weekend, it turns out someone *else’s* romance got here first.”

Will has to close his eyes when they reach the top, trying to steady himself when it still feels like the world is spinning at the corners of his eyes. When he drags air into his lungs, the breath tastes homey - floral. “That’s what we’re calling it then - romance?”

“It’s something, alright,” Jack says grimly, clearly having been waiting for them. His shadow blocks the light even through the thin skin of Will’s eyelids, and the expression he is making at Will, when Will opens his eyes again to see it, is dark. “And I’d like you to tell us what.”

Will sighs, removing his glasses with a nod. Steeling himself for a moment or two before he walks past Jack Crawford to see the show that has dragged them all into work on a Saturday morning.

His head is hurting already.

The viewing room at the top of the Pagoda is a little place of light and air. It is also currently full of purple flowers - *English lavender,* Beverly declares, even as Zeller and Price stop dead at the sight, gobsmacked -, fresh blooms tied up in huge bouquets and strewn everywhere over a tumble of luxurious sheets, blankets and cushions in blues and purples, yellows and

greens. Windchimes have been hung at the - currently closed - door to the balcony, and a large mini fridge is humming quietly against one wall.

A dead Caucasian man is sitting cross-legged in the middle of a large mound of cushions, a crown made of lavender set upon his head whilst he offers out another one with uplifted palms on his lap. He is barefoot, but otherwise dressed in a pair of loose dress pants and a flowing white poet shirt that gapes open to his navel.

The pristine whiteness of the shirt is somewhat alarming considering the large, perfect hole that has been carved into the man's torso beneath it - revealing that the victim's sternum has been entirely removed, a large portion of the nearby costal cartilage and ribcage with it. The victim's lungs are missing in their entirety, and the void where the organs should be has been stuffed with further small bouquets of lavender.

Small purple blooms lovingly cushion the heart that has been left behind.

(Well. This *looks* like a Ripper kill.)

"How did anyone get all this up those stairs?!" Zeller hisses.

Will ignores him, pulling on a pair of nitrile gloves and stepping carefully into the room on the plastic sheeting the crime scene technicians have already laid down for that purpose. "Cause of death?"

"We'll need to confirm with an autopsy, but shock and exsanguination seems likely," Beverly says from behind him. "Potentially asphyxiation, if he lived that long." Will hears her hesitate, likely pausing to get a reaction from Jack before adding, "We're thinking the lungs were taken while our vic was still alive."

And yet there's no blood on the victim or soft furnishings that Will can immediately see. A fastidious killer.

"Taking a leaf out of the Shrike Copycat's book?" Jack rumbles.

Will can see how Jack would have made the connection. Will has too - though, in fairness, the Ripper and his flair for organ removal had come first. "Or vice versa. He wasn't killed here."

"Not enough mess for that," Jack agrees.

"Didn't want to get blood on the cushions."

"Good manners," Price notes, crouching down to snap a photograph of the mini fridge.

"Good aesthetics," Will corrects quietly. The whole room screams of rigid control and a vision exactly fulfilled. Blood splatter would have thrown off the artful nonchalance of it all.

Will moves closer to the body, feeling how thick and *expensive* the blankets thrown over the floor are by how they shift under the plastic under his feet. No-one stepping into this… this

arbour has to feel the hardness of the floorboards, everything soft and comfortable to touch. The air sweet with lavender.

Will is reminded of the scent of Hannibal's body wash, the caress of fingers and shower steam and the taste of steak in his mouth. The memory sensations follow him down as the pendulum swings in his mind.

The Pagoda is both a pretty and secure location, a fairytale's answer to a fairytale dream. The doors to the stairs and the balcony can be bolted, and intruders can only try and access the top of the tower one at a time due to the narrowness of the stairs. Here, at the top, one is safe from the world but can still watch the world go by - apart from life but still a part of it.

Supplies do not need to last for long; this is a place of rest, not a permanent refuge.

The sheets and blankets come first. Each piece of linen has been carefully chosen for its luxury, its complimentary colour and its softness, and is just as carefully arranged in the viewing room. Pieces are layered for effect; edges are woven together to preserve structural integrity as the fabric bulks up to form bolsters against the walls. Cushions of all shapes and sizes are piled on top, chosen and arranged with as much care as the sheets and blankets.

To Will's carefully assessing eye, the floor has become a soft sea, a twilight aubade or lullaby whose waves are meant to beckon invited guests down, down, into soft, sleepy folds and security. A sparkle of gold in the yellow as the greeting or goodbye of the sun speckled across the waters.

Invited *guest.* These furnishings, in these colours, have been picked out with one person in mind, an appeal to one person's tastes and nature.

The mini fridge is brought in and - stocked? Stocked with things to delight the one this picture is meant for. It has its own battery, and doesn't depend on uncertain power from the Pagoda's system.

The victim is next, unrolled from plastic sheeting? Brought out from a lined bag? Naked. The man is already dead, but only very recently. His suffering was deserved, but he is not the important part of this picture. His death was a necessity for the scene, required for the message.

Rigor mortis hasn't set in yet, and the victim's limbs are still malleable enough to dress him and arrange him into the desired pose. Remove the wadded stuffing from the cavity in the victim's chest that soaked up the unwanted blood, dispose of the wadding elsewhere, and replace it with flowers. Bouquet after bouquet of lavender, filling the room and the victim with its sweet soothing fragrance rather than the stench of iron and death. Windchimes are hung at the door, to provide an equally sweet melody.

Will's last act is to lay the lavender crowns on the victim's head and in his hands: one for himself, and one offered out to the viewer. To the intended.

This. This is all for you; offered out for you to take it.

This is his design.

Will returns to- to *himself* with a sigh, scrubbing his hand over his face as though he could physically claw everything he's seen so far that day out of his brain. The *pain* pounding directly behind his eyeballs.

"So?" Jack prompts him, looming over Will's shoulder.

The clicking of cameras pauses as Beverly, Price and Zeller listen in.

"None of this," Will gestures to the room - the flowers, the cushions, the *everything* -, "has anything to do with our victim. He's here simply because the killer *needed* someone to be here, and decided to use the body for something useful. The killer thought of the victim as nothing more than a tool - less than human, and undeserving of life."

Jack nods, accepting that observation, but they both know that hadn't been what he'd been asking Will about.

Will sighs again, replacing his glasses on his face. He needs that extra shield against the world right now, even as he's giving Jack what Jack both does and really doesn't want to hear.

"Evident surgical knowledge. Organ and abdominal mutilations. Lack of - immediate - obvious trace evidence. Theatrical, almost whimsical at first glance, staging, and a dispassionate derision and disregard for the victim. You're better off getting this all triple-checked at the lab for the finer details, but all the hallmarks are here, Jack. He hung *windchimes*." Like a cherry on top.

"The Ripper," Jack says grimly.

"Most likely."

The Chesapeake Ripper. If it really *is* him, and he holds to pattern, they can expect two more bodies staged like this to be dropped soon. Two more chances to catch Maryland's most infamous mass murderer before this cycle closes, if this tableau doesn't bear fruit.

It probably won't: the Ripper is too good at what he does to leave evidence behind, and his field of fucks for the FBI's suffering is painfully barren.

Will turns and stretches, wincing a little at the *crack* of the bones in his neck. "Have we had any luck ID'ing the vic?"

"Nothing so far," Beverly says, shifting the weight on her feet away from Jack's palpably building frustration, a great wall of peppery patchouli that mixes poorly with the lavender up Will's nose. "But you don't think the ID will throw up any leads?"

"Still a courtesy to let the next of kin know," Price says with an easy shrug, swiping through the pictures he'd already taken on his camera. "Gotta plan the wake and all that."

Zeller pauses in his work again, his own camera half-lowered. “I never got throwing a party for the dead.”

“You haven’t met my brother-in-law.”

“The victim doesn’t matter here,” Will reconfirms, ducking his head to try and breathe shallowly into the collar of his shirt. Jack’s rising scent is aggravating Will’s headache more than anything else. “Not to our killer. The rest of the scene… this is all *meant* for someone. To appeal to them. The colours, the fabric, the flowers.”

Beverly hums, considering. “Lavender represents love, loyalty and devotion in western floriography. Not to mention its uses in herbal medicine and the kitchen.”

“Soothes anxiety, helps you sleep,” Price chimes in.

“Neither of which has been clinically proven,” Zeller adds.

Price shrugs back at him. “Smells nice and keeps the moths out of your drawers.”

“Think we could trace where it’s from?” Jack asks before Zeller and Price can get into a - heated - debate about exactly *whose* drawers have moths in them.

“Lavender’s popular in kitchen gardens everywhere,” Beverly tells him, halfway to a wince.

“Could try and trace the diatoms if there’s any water remaining in the stems,” Price offers, though he doesn’t look terribly optimistic. “But this is a lot of lavender just to get from one source. Our unsub probably bought it from a wide selection of sellers.”

“It’s not so unusual to buy it in bulk either.” Beverly again.

“Cross-referencing is a thing,” Price reminds her - and then joins her in wincing, realising the amount of work he has just proposed for them all.

“So are interns,” Zeller says swiftly, also very eager not to be stuck cross-referencing a great many very long lists with each other for the next few weeks. “Baby agents. Newbies?”

“Not us.”

“Yes, that.”

Will goes to examine the mini fridge whilst the unimpressed Jack stares his lab team down. (Putting a little more space in the small room between himself and Jack.)

Technicians have already taken pictures of the fridge and dusted it for prints, but Will still carefully opens it from the side by prying apart the seal rather than gripping the handle on the door.

Without detail, Will’s mental reconstruction had filled the fridge with a generic cornucopia, an endless bounty, but reality yields something a little more practical. Bottles of sweet fruit juice and mineral water, a small selection of fruit, and a large tray of what are clearly very

expensive luxury chocolates, each individual sweet decorated and distinct from the rest, wrapped in its own individual case.

Will's mouth waters just looking at them.

Beverly seems to be having a similar reaction, her expression mournful as she trots up beside Will to snap another photograph of the open fridge. "Oh, those look *so good.* Shame it's all going to sit in an evidence locker somewhere once we're done hacking it up."

"It's probably highly unethical to eat murder chocolate," Price says as he wanders closer in a crinkling of plastic sheeting, aiming for consolation and missing it by miles - especially when he glances pointedly at Zeller. "Worse than not buying fair trade when you can."

Zeller, predictably, bristles. "Oh my God, it was one time; I literally only had *cents* in my pocket and I was craving the chocolatey goodness. The Hershey's was the only thing I could afford!"

There is no Hershey's chocolate in the fridge. Aside from the glaringly obvious difference in brands however, the contents of the mini fridge look remarkably like the supplies Will might buy for himself to consume during his heats: sweet, small and quick to eat, and high enough in calories to stop his blood sugar levels from crashing before his heat has passed enough for him to eat a proper meal.

Oh.

Will takes a step back from the fridge - and the squabbling Price and Zeller -, looking at the room around him with new eyes. A deeper understanding.

I have made a place for my intended within the circle of my protection, and left them room to grow. To build for themselves.

How had Will missed it?

"Our victim is a beta, right?" Small scent glands on his throat, a scent easily obscured by death and the flowers around them.

Jack perks, sensing a realisation behind Will's question. "You think that's important?"

"The Ripper takes victims regardless of sex, dynamic, age, race or social class," Zeller says snidely, his mood having taken an obvious downturn after having his ethical consumption habits called into question.

Will ignores him. "Don't you think this set-up is a little odd for a beta?" At everyone's confused pause, Will sweeps out an arm, gesturing to the room in its entirety again. The nice safe location. The cosy furnishings. The provided food. The 'romance'. "Doesn't it remind you of anything?"

Beverly catches on - but then, as a younger alpha more prone to courting behaviours, Will had thought (and hoped) she might. "...It's a nest."

Zeller's face twists with doubt. "An omega nest?"

"Not necessarily," Price says. "It's been proven that other dynamics also nest."

"Yeah, but, statistically. It's usually omegas who nest unprompted."

"It's not a nest," Will tells them. "Or not *just* a nest. When omegas nest, they nest for a feeling of comfort and security. This wasn't built to make its *creator* feel comfortable or safe; it was made for someone else."

"It's an alpha's den," Beverly realises, and the light of understanding washes across everyone's expressions.

"It's the *Ripper's* den," Will elaborates, turning back to look at Jack - and his growing scowl - to press the point home. "Rolling out the red carpet for his mate of choice, showing off all the ways he can provide, all the things he can do."

One of the later stages in courtship between an alpha and their partner of choice is usually for the alpha to build their intended a den. A secure location, showing off all the ways the alpha can protect and provide for their partner, showing all the ways they understand the needs and taste of their partner.

If the intended partner is an omega, a sign of acceptance at that level of courtship is for the omega to build a nest inside the den. *Out* of the den, combining the two.

"You're telling me the Ripper has found a *mate?!"* Jack thunders. Looking both disgusted and aghast by the thought of serial killers settling down. Potentially breeding.

"I'd say he's got his eye on someone, most likely an omega," Will says. Waves back at their victim, his wrist loose and aim a little wonky as he squints against another throb of pain in his head. "This man is both the Ripper's courting gift and proxy."

Building dens is primarily an alpha behaviour, but the proxy is a beta. Will is aware of the dissonance even before Jack voices it, only able to offer a shrug in reply to further questioning.

He really can see for miles from the viewing room's windows, just like Price had said. If Will gets the angle just right, he can see right over to Hannibal's neighbourhood nearby, perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes away by car.

If the day were a kinder one, Will would be over there instead of here, waking up to another round of sex with the good doctor and a delicious brunch rather than standing in a little oriental-esque tower staring at a corpse and feeling like his aching brain is trying to push his eyeballs out of his skull.

The day, however, is not a particularly kind one, and post-coital pancakes do not appear to be on Will's map for that weekend, never mind the horizon. Will has to close his eyes again to try and centre himself as Price, Zeller and now Jack all continue to argue around him, a dizzying swirl of voices. The Ripper's windchimes are twinkling mockingly on the edge of

his awareness just to spite them all, its metal rods coaxed into gentle movement by the air currents inside the Pagoda and their own gesticulating limbs.

D, C, A, A, A -

“It’s a song,” Will murmurs, his eyes still shut.

The arguing screeches to a halt.

“...What?” Price asks.

C, C, A-E, A, A -

“*This,”* Will says, lifting his hands in front of him with uplifted palms. Listening to the chimes as they echo in the quiet behind his eyes, a half-forgotten lullaby from his childhood for long evenings and daydreams on summer days. “The flowers, the crowns, the courting proposal. *Lavender’s blue, dilly dilly, lavender’s green. When I am king, dilly dilly, you shall be queen.*” His voice cracks a little in the middle; it’s been a while since Will last sang anything for anyone.

Will opens his eyes again, meeting the mingled reactions of confusion, horror, and irritation from the others with his own resignation. “If you take down those windchimes, I bet you they’ll play those notes.”

Lavender’s green, dilly dilly, lavender’s blue. If you love me, dilly dilly, I will love you.

If Jack scowls any harder, his face is going to be stuck like that. “A den and a song: the Ripper’s *romance.* Alphas don’t build courting dens for others without expecting to show them to the person they’re courting eventually. Who’s the Ripper hoping to show this den to?”

“I don’t know, Jack.” Will feels used up and wrung out, and his head is aching so badly he feels top-heavy. “Statistically,” a nod to Zeller even as Will begins desperately digging in his jacket’s pockets for some aspirin, “I’d say you’re looking for an omega. Someone who likes the den’s colour scheme?”

“Unlucky omega,” Zeller mutters, which is probably all the thanks Will is going to get for his acknowledgement.

“You think they know they’re being courted?” Jack asks, thankfully not giving his opinion on Will’s suggestion that they canvas potential love interests of the Ripper by asking them what their favourite colours are.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Will says, swallowing two pills dry and grimacing as the chalky lump of them moves down his throat. “But the Ripper would want his intended to see this. At the moment, that’s got to be a fairly limited list.”

Will should really know better than to taunt the universe like that by now.

Beverly's phone beeps, and the screen glares harsh red and white light against her face when she checks her notifications - the colours of *Tattlecrime.* "Uh. About that?"

...A not so limited list any more.

Will… Will has no idea how he gets down to the base of the Pagoda and outdoors. He has no recollection of taking the stairs at all; between one sore blink of his eyes and the next he goes from Jack yelling down his phone about Lounds again to standing outside in the fresh air with Beverly.

There are cherry blossom trees outside the Pagoda. Come spring, the air must be filled with soft pink and white petals, sweetness on the wind. Now, the sun is out, but the breeze is a little brisk. Luckily, there isn't really a crowd, even with the yellow police tape cordoning off the Pagoda flapping noisily around the perimeter.

Will sways on his feet. Disorientated. He's even managed to take his nitrile gloves off without noticing?

"...You alright?" Beverly asks him. Looking genuinely concerned, a thin flash of red around her irises. "You're looking a bit peaky."

"Bad headache," Will says. Then, "Permanent revolving flu. Doctor said."

"You'll wanna watch out for that. It can do a number on your lungs."

"Doctor said that too," Will says, and then grins tiredly, all crooked. Enjoying, for a moment, the quiet, and the non-oppressive scent of an alpha that is trying to offer him comfort but *isn't* trying to hit on him, the sweet pink pepper of Beverly's scent better than cherry blossoms in November. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Beverly gives him a look but nods, slowly. "Long as I'm allowed to choose not to answer it if I think it's *too* personal."

"You and your boyfriend… you both build dens, right?"

"…'Cause I know you, I'm gonna assume this isn't a 'which of you is the *real* alpha in the relationship' type of question." Beverly's tone suggests she just might drop-kick Will if it is.

"Fuck, no."

"Okay, good." Beverly smiles again, and Will lets the defensive tense of his shoulders relax. "Yeah, we both build dens. For each other, mostly, but we've both got little sibs, so that happens now and then too. Actually, we've got more of one big communal den."

"Would you say you fill it with your trophies?"

Beverly ponders that for a moment, mentally examining her den against alpha stereotypes. "...Well, we've got the various certificates of our qualifications on the walls? Some funky decorations we picked out that made us think of each other. Some cushions made out of meaningful old clothes, my blanket, that sort of stuff."

Trophies look different for everyone, because achievements can be highly personal.

"...In the least sexy come on kind of way an alpha could mean this," Beverly offers, "you could come see it?" *What?* "I was gonna ask you anyway, but what are your plans for Thanksgiving?"

Uh. "...Why?"

Beverly grins, a return of Will's crooked one earlier, very wry. "I don't know if you've heard, but it's also Hanukkah. Thanksgiving, first day of Hanukkah. *Thanksgivukkah.*"

Will… might have seen some of the ads for that about the place, yeah. "Weren't they going with *Chanksgiving?"*

"I get enough of that kind of talk from my dad's side of the family, thank you very much. We're calling it Thanksgivukkah and we're going to be as tacky as humanly possible about it." Fair enough. "Saul - that's my boyfriend - has a job that day. He couldn't turn the opportunity down, and the rest of my family's flown off to see my sister's new baby. So I'm alone until like 8 at night on Thanksgivukkah, which kind of sucks even if you're mostly secular."

Will can't say much about the Hanukkah aspect, but, ever since his dad had died, he'd spent every Thanksgiving alone with his dogs and a few beers. Occasionally a properly cooked meal for one, if he'd remembered to buy in the groceries before his day off.

"C'mon," Beverly half-pleads, half-urges him. She's- she's really serious about this request. It's not an idea borne of pity or anything like that. "A few hours in the afternoon, a late lunch? We can stick the parade on TV and I'll feed you. No turkey or any of that schtick, but I make some mean gochujang meatballs."

"Latkes?"

"*So* many latkes."

When had been the last time someone had offered to spend a holiday with Will? And not out of pity?

"Uh-" Will has to unclench his hands; his nails - too long again, *already* - are gouging holes into the meat of his palms, little pricks of pain to echo the throb of his head, the ache building up behind his ribcage. "O-okay. Yeah, that sounds good. Thanks."

Beverly's smile outshines the sunlight for a moment. Too painful to look at. Will hunches his shoulder, feeling the redness of his cheeks, and looks away.

At Quantico - late - that afternoon, it turns out Will had been right about the windchimes. Will had managed a late lunch for himself of coffee and a pot noodle, and lost both to another stomach upset and a dash to the toilet. The morgue actually manages to smell *better* than partially digested and caffeinated instant noodles mixed with bathroom cleaner, and the tinny sound of Price and Zeller hitting each of the individual chimes to record the note it plays welcomes him back to the room.

Beverly, nursing her own coffee in the doorway, greets him with a wave. "*Lavender's Blue*'s a bit dodgy, but we've managed a mean *Twinkle Twinkle.*"

"I was an ace on the triangle in elementary," Zeller tells them both with a sniff as Price hits another G chime beside him.

"Percussion," says Price. C, G, G, G, F-E D-C -

"What?"

"That's what the section of the orchestra is called with the triangle in it," says Price. C, A, A A. "Percussion. From Latin *percussio,* meaning 'to be struck hard.'"

"Okay, yeah, but I wasn't playing the whole percussion section by myself."

"I was stuck in the string section," Beverly confides to the room. "Violin. Will?"

"...Piano," Will offers in reply to her expectant look, his eyes flicking once more to Price plonking the windchimes - C, G, G, G, F-E D-C -, "but I mostly missed out on the joys of orchestra practice."

"As the less musically-inclined twin, I was placed in the best section of all," Price says. "The audience." F, E, D, C. "*Yes!"*

Thrilled as they all are by Price's sudden display of musical prowess, the conversation quickly shifts from the windchimes to the dead body on the other table as soon as Beverly has finished her breaktime coffee, other rooms in the labs given over to the lavender bouquets and other furnishings that had been found in the Pagoda. Jack is still busy trying to find out who had leaked enough information about - and *pictures* of - the murder scene to Freddie Lounds for her to write her latest article (*RIPPER'S PRINCESS IS IN ANOTHER TOWER?*), but none of them want to be caught slacking when he finally comes down and joins them.

There's still no ID for the victim, but the autopsy has revealed their John Doe had had his tongue surgically removed along with his lungs.

"Speechless as well as breathless," Will says with a frown. His mouth still tastes sour from vomit, even after sipping some water and grabbing some mints from the nearest vending machine. "But the heart is unaffected?"

"Wholly intact and in place," says Zeller. "Seems like the Ripper doesn't go for love."

"Struck, but not in the heart. Huh." Price ponders for a moment. "Maybe it's just a puppy crush?"

Will's frown deepens. "If the Ripper wanted to show us he had a *crush,* he'd've literally filled this man's stomach with butterflies. No, this is a more ardent declaration than that."

"You're a picky date, Graham," Beverly says with a sigh. "Psychopaths aren't renowned for their emotional intelligence. Maybe this is a case of delayed realisation."

"Maybe the Ripper's aromantic," Price says, and shrugs when the rest of them turn to look at him. "I'm just putting it out there."

They had called the scene in the Pagoda *romance* before 'officially' ascribing it to the Ripper. (And now Lounds has put it in writing.)

Beverly tilts her head. "Really don't think the general ace community would appreciate adding the Chesapeake Ripper to their ranks, but I'm not sure if that idea is better or worse than picturing the Ripper as a lovelorn dumbass with issues of romantic self-understanding."

"I, for one, am deeply comforted by the thought that the Chesapeake Ripper's love-life sucks more than mine," says Zeller.

"Not trying to woo people with corpses probably helps," Price chips in.

Will moves away from the body. "In some cultures and during some periods of history, it was a perfectly valid - and encouraged - courting technique. What's a better trophy than the body of your vanquished opponent?"

"Can't say a corpse would win my approval," Price sniffs. "What's wrong with a bottle of tequila and a few tubs of Ben & Jerrys?"

"Half Baked?" Zeller asks.

"Phish Food, please."

"I crocheted a giant blanket for our den at home," Beverly says, smiling when Price immediately gives her an impressed *ooo* and thumbs up. "I agreed to keep us stocked up with marshmallows as long as my boyfriend committed to doing the vacuuming."

"Vacuuming's good," Will offers absently, his mind half drifting away to the endless tide of dog fur he has to beat back in his home. Someone else offering to do the floors and lint-roller the furniture is going to get them an appreciative date from Will, if nothing else. "Throw in some decent whiskey, fresh beignets, and a pot of gumbo to hand for me."

A fresh bowl of gumbo after a week-long heat is the best thing, the food both filling and comforting when Will is still too tired to do anything but cradle the warm bowl against his chest and breathe in its familiar spice.

"And some people say you don't have any taste," Beverly teases.

"Our genteel southern beau," Price sighs in true ham fashion, one hand fluttering in front of his face like a fan.

Will glowers at both of them. “I’d say bless your heart, but the meaning might get lost in translation to your northern ears.”

“No,” Beverly says, mock-thoughtful as she glances between her colleagues and Will, “I think we caught the *fuck you.*”

“*Never* let it be said that we don’t appreciate a good *fuck you,*” Price concurs, “no matter the dialect.”

“Can we not talk about fucking over the dead guy, metaphorical, pejorative or otherwise?” Zeller asks of them with a grimace. “Please?”

The teasing subsides, and Will makes his escape as soon as Jack shows his face in the morgue and has received his thoughts.

That night, Will dreams of being wrapped up, naked, safe in a sea of blue and purple silk and cotton, his head cushioned on the lap of a black monster with no features on its face but a wide, wide mouth full of fangs. Fingers like knives of night tenderly brush Will’s hair and the buds of lavender blossoms woven into it away from his face, slicing small cuts into Will’s lips when they press against his mouth, urging him to part his lips to accept small bites of food. Shipwrecked on the loving, lapping shore, twilight water shushes about Will's ears.

Staring upwards, entranced by the void of that mouth, Will obediently opens his own mouth, tasting his own blood and the warm savoury tang of meat as the monster places a morsel lovingly on his tongue. Will chews, feeling the monster’s fingers brush against his throat as he swallows, knives that press and cut tenderly against the column of Will’s neck as the mouthful passes down his oesophagus and into the depths of his stomach.

Warmth trickles down Will’s neck - on the outside. Warmth trickles down the inside of Will’s thighs as well, and he shifts in his twilight cocoon, flushing pink to match the stripes of red he’s earning under a monster’s touch. Heat blooming in his belly, anchoring him in the deeps.

He opens his mouth again, for the next bite, and his monster’s grin grows.

Sunday afternoons in early winter turn Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier’s home into a place of cool air and colder light. Lined in pale walls and plain dark woods, each angled room is slotted against the next with perfect architectural precision: an artificial honeycomb whose hexagonal cells have been stripped of honey, pollen and larvae.

The queen remains: Bedelia’s hair sits in several perfect blonde coils down over one shoulder, all the colour in the room where she holds her appointments with Hannibal besides Hannibal himself. Pale clothes in pressed lines, pale skin smooth as marble, pale blue eyes as

cool as the November sunlight. A beautiful beta woman. A painstakingly exquisite sculpture of personhood.

Hannibal has always admired the effort that has gone into that sculpture's construction, appreciating the clear cold facets of Bedelia's self-actualisation. Each pitiless cut. Borrowing some of Bedelia's creative techniques for uses of his own.

They sit opposite one another, Bedelia framed by the light of one of her windows. It is as muted as her voice is when she speaks: one, with muslin curtains, and the other with all the weight of her consideration.

"This always goes better if I'm perfectly honest with you."

"What would be the point otherwise?" Hannibal asks her with the faint quirk of a smile. Both of them sit with one leg slung across the other: Hannibal, leaning back at ease, and Bedelia -

Bedelia closed off. She hardly ever rises to his baiting, delivering her incisiveness with practised tranquillity. "Well, one of us has to be honest."

"I'm honest."

"Not perfectly."

"As honest as anyone." Hannibal's smile tightens at the corner of his mouth, the sole of his supporting foot pressing more firmly to the floor.

"Not really." Bedelia refuses to be moved. She knows exactly how much to push to make her point, but presses on no further than that lest she be burdened by knowledge she does not wish to know. One can only learn so much and live, but without knowing - or guessing - a certain amount, she would be useless as a psychiatrist to Hannibal. "I have conversations with a version of you and hope the actual you gets what he needs."

Hannibal considers that, tilting his head to study the thought - and the woman behind it - at another angle. "A version of me?"

"Naturally, I respect its meticulous construction, but you are wearing a very well-tailored person suit."

Oh, what a metaphor. The sting from the implication of Hannibal's dishonesty is soothed by the aptness of Bedelia's moment of poetry. "Do you refer to me as Person Suit with your psychiatrist friends?"

"I don't discuss patients with my psychiatrist friends," Bedelia says, a flash of her disapproval showing for a moment in the thinning of her lips, "especially since I only have one patient who chose to ignore my retirement."

"A patient who wears a person suit."

"I can still see the shape of you," Bedelia clarifies, "but you're elegantly obstructed. So, really, it's less of a person suit and more of a human veil."

“I prefer we call it a human shield.”

There: the sculpture that is Bedelia blinks, a question in her blue eyes that she smothers behind her lashes. *Shielding whom from whom?*

“That must be lonely,” she says instead.

Loneliness is not an emotion that Hannibal finds himself subject to. “I have friends. And the opportunities for friends.”

“On the other side of the veil.” Ergo, no *intimate* friends at all.

Hannibal allows himself a frown. “You and I are friendly.”

“You’re my patient and my colleague,” Bedelia corrects him, “not my friend. When your hour is up I’ll pour you a glass of wine; nevertheless, you’ll be drinking it on the other side of the veil.”

The perfume Bedelia prefers is a fierce icy tuberose - layered with alpha pheromones at its base so that people often think twice about trying to speak over the petite beta even before she opens her mouth. Sharp green notes and cool white florals compliment the main bouquet, whilst those brave enough to move in close to her can pick up the coconut and orange blossom of the creams Bedelia uses on her skin. All, mingled, overwhelm her natural scent - the most Hannibal has sniffed of it had been *crisp,* like cold air, and a note of flowers.

For one of her milestone birthdays, Hannibal had custom-ordered Bedelia a scent from a specialist perfumery in Florence. Something to bring out her natural scent, he had thought: rosemary, sage and artemisia, lavender and geranium, cloves, cinnamon, and tonka beans with a careful mix of alpha pheromones and musk.

Bedelia had accepted his gift with duly gracious thanks, and never worn it.

Hannibal wonders, occasionally, if she had simply poured the bottle down her sink.

“Why do you bother?”

“I see enough of you to see the truth of you. And I like you.”

Hannibal is fond of her in return. Bedelia sees only as much of him as she dares to, but that is still a great deal more than most, and just enough for her not to become a threat to him.

“I do not believe my veil is as impermeable as you think it is.”

Bedelia’s mouth turns down minutely at the corners, another crease in her façade. For all the directness of their remarks to one another, she and Hannibal have always talked *around* the elephants in the room - and so there she sits now, the realisation dawning upon her that she has finally been brought to the issue that had led to Hannibal creating an appointment with her that afternoon and Hannibal has found her too busy minding the elephants to be quite wholly prepared.

Hannibal graciously grants Bedelia a moment's worth of mental scrabbling to catch up, smiling pleasantly against the sharpness of her gaze on his face.

"...Is there someone new in your life?"

Clever, clever Bedelia. Hannibal nods, smoothly dipping his head. "I met a man, on the surface nothing much like myself. A colleague. I'm curious about him, curious about my reaction to him, and that got me curious about friendship."

"That's progress." Were she an alpha or omega, Bedelia's eyes would be lined with red or gold: annoyed at him. Haughtiness weighs out the length of her vowels, the cadence of her speech already languorous. "I always considered you an individualist. The social anti-social."

"A polite way of saying sociopath?"

"I'm not sure how to categorise you in those terms. And I think you prefer it that way."

Hannibal lets a hint of his teeth show as his smile spreads further - a dimpling, a show of being abashed. "I'm afraid once you figure me out, you'll lose interest."

Bedelia is not impressed, professionally refusing to indulge his professed attachment to her as though their entire relationship - on all its levels - is not riddled with unorthodoxy. "What has made you curious about your colleague?"

Perhaps that there had been anything to be curious about at all. Most individuals, Hannibal has found, are largely uninteresting.

"He's nothing like me. We see the world in different ways, yet he can assume my point of view."

Bedelia nods, though there is a short-lived struggle behind her eyes for a few moments as she debates whether this news should worry her or not. Her curiosity wins out - a creature kin to Hannibal's. "How has he demonstrated that?"

"He's demonstrated the capacity. He creates profiles for the FBI."

Of criminals, Hannibal does not say. Another elephant for Bedelia to metaphorically step around, Hannibal's implied similarities to criminals allowed to linger only because Hannibal had been the one to mention them.

And Bedelia steps neatly even as she requests clarification, the sculpted coils of her hair still perfectly in place. "He has created profiles of others you consider not entirely dissimilar to yourself?"

Hannibal dips his head again: *yes.* "As good a demonstration as any. I find it reassuring."

Bedelia allows those words to hang in the quiet of her home, giving them space to silently echo through each room as though she believes they, like Hannibal, must be searching for friends.

“It’s nice to have someone see us, Hannibal. Or have the ability to see us. It requires trust. Trust isn’t easy for you.”

“You mean,” Hannibal delicately inquires, “behind the veil?”

By the flare of her nostrils and the slight widening of her eyes, that is precisely what Bedelia had meant, though she had not expected him to raise the topic again.

Two missteps in one day: Bedelia will likely finish the bottle of wine she has already proposed to open at the end of their session, after Hannibal has gone. The vice is her own - she had insisted as much when Hannibal had asked her once whether she blamed him for the actions which he thought might have driven her to drink. Blood on both their hands, the smooth marble of her cheek cool against his throat.

No, Bedelia had told him with all her haughty scorn: no-one and nothing drove her to drink. She was - and is -, as with all decisions in her own life, her own chauffeur.

“What has made you curious about your reaction to your colleague?” Bedelia asks him at last.

Everything.

“I found myself in the unusual situation of having my assumptions about him proven wrong,” Hannibal says with studied lightness, “whilst in the midst of acting upon my presumptions of him as though they were fact. I assumed that, because I knew he could think like me, he would act in the way I believe I myself would act in a particular situation. He did not.”

“To his credit?”

“To our mutual benefit.”

Bedelia can sense the facts that Hannibal is carefully omitting from his tale, her pupils narrowed on his face - but resigns herself to circling them like a cat that slithers over the surface of an iced-over pond, trying to bat at the blurred shadows of the koi it can see swimming beneath. “You have acted upon both presumptions and assumptions before.”

She wishes to know: *why has this instance, out of countless others over the course of your life, been the one to cause a reaction in you?*

“Very rarely without the awareness of having done so,” says Hannibal. He hadn’t questioned the conclusions he had drawn for himself when he should have, despite overlooking several - extremely obvious - variables.

(*Because, when it came to Will Graham, I was looking at nothing* but *him and still found myself* blind.)

“You found yourself, after the fact, having been caught looking at the forest rather than its trees,” Bedelia surmises. “And one of those trees is not the species you believed it was.”

Hannibal nods.

“It is not a bad thing to be surprised by others, Hannibal.”

“No,” Hannibal agrees, “it is not. But I believe I will be analysing my own beliefs about both tree and forest somewhat more stringently in the future before acting upon them.”

It will not do to overlook the - probably - obvious again, not with so much at stake. Countless angels dancing upon the head of the pin skewered high in Hannibal’s throat, the prick as a reminder when he breathes, when he swallows.

“Attachments can be blinding. It doesn’t hurt to take a step back in our relationships with other people at times,” Bedelia offers him, a useful bit of advice that she shades with every current that had threaded through their conversation, “to assess their place and impact in our lives and look at our own investments.”

Attachments.

Investments.

Impact.

Hannibal purses his lips, considering. (How *would* he describe his relationship with Will Graham? And how would others, if given all the facts, describe it?)

“A more emotionally healthy relationship, however,” Bedelia warns him, “will also require you to take that step back *in* as well.”

“To trust.”

Bedelia nods, the light and shadows of the room shifting and rippling on her hair. Another puff of icy tuberose in the room as her shirt rubs against the skin of her throat. “You spend a lot of time building walls, Hannibal. It’s natural to want to see if anyone is clever enough to climb over them.”

She stands, smoothing down the lines of her skirt with one hand before moving over to her small wine cabinet against one wall. “As you mind your walls, however - take care to also keep an eye on your gates.” Keeping Hannibal in side-view. “Red or white?”

Their session is finished, tender fleshy thoughts tucked up safe behind Hannibal’s teeth.

“I think something pink, don’t you?”

“We’re pretty damn sure it’s the Ripper, but the only real way of being certain is if we can connect this murder his others in the past or if two more bodies drop like it.”

Will had caught Hannibal in the middle of cooking their dinner. The beta had clearly had half a mind on the food in his oven when he had answered the door and greeted Will standing there, leading the way back to his kitchen as soon as he had helped Will remove and hang his coat.

A soft hum. “One might hope that the FBI will have apprehended the killer before then.”

“One might hope,” Will says, not at all minding trailing along behind Hannibal when the beta’s waistcoat and tied apron do such great things for emphasising the trim lines of Hannibal’s waist and the curve of his ass below it, “but one might also suspect that to be an unlikely result based upon past performances.”

“So disparaging,” Hannibal says, already busy with his fridge and cupboards again. Glasses. Ice. Some artistically fiddly twirls of lemon peel.

Something in the oven - fish? - smells *fantastic,* and Will’s stomach rumbles. The last time he’d eaten something had been a brunch of scrambled eggs and bacon just before half 10. Not long after that, Jack Crawford had called Will up and hauled him into Quantico to consult on the Ripper’s Pagoda scene again - thus ruining Will’s Sunday afternoon the same way he had ruined the entirety of Will’s Saturday.

One of the glasses - now filled with a fizzing mixture of two different bottles from the fridge - is gently pushed across the expanse of the kitchen island towards Will: *for you.* Will gravitates closer to Hannibal and takes the drink with a grateful dip of his head, beading condensation already cold against his fingers. “The only way anyone’s catching the Ripper is if he *wants* to be caught.”

Hannibal, already busy chopping green and purple leafy… *things* at the island, looks at him inquiringly. His knife flashes in the light, steel clicking rhythmically against the board beneath it.

“He’s too good at what he does,” Will explains. Hoping he doesn’t sound as admiring as he grudgingly feels. “All the bodies and the props they’re posed with are wiped clean, the items perfectly generic or so common there’s never an identifiable paper trail to follow back to where he might have bought them. There’s no trace evidence left at the scenes. The victims are always snatched when they’re alone, when we can find out where they’ve been snatched from, taken without any kind of struggle that helps us identify their kidnapper and killer.”

Will sighs and takes a brief sip of his drink: some kind of sweet cordial, mixed with lemonade? “I could go on, but I’m basically just reciting a rant I got from Zeller earlier because the Ripper has him and several lab teams painstakingly going over several hundred lavender flowers one by one on the off-chance even *one* of them has caught one of the Ripper’s fingerprints or DNA.”

“A needle in a haystack.”

“A needle in a field of haystacks. And someone has to search for it before it stabs someone.” Will takes another, larger, swallow of his drink, letting the sweetness soothe his throat and sending the twist of lemon peel spinning in the liquid in his glass. Trying not to pace in

Hannibal's kitchen, too wary of getting in the path of the doctor-chef. "Everybody's tired and frustrated."

"Well," Hannibal says, pausing the preparations of his *mise en place* for a moment to look up and smile at Will, "I hope I can alleviate a little of your frustration this evening at least."

Honestly, Hannibal already *has.* After the shit afternoon Will has had, Hannibal's text in response to Will's griping, offering to cook for Will that night and lend a sympathetic ear, had felt like the clouds parting to bestow blessings from above.

Getting the chance to ogle Hannibal's ass and strong forearms doesn't hurt either.

"Thanks. I - uh - I wasn't really in the mood for cooking tonight. Thought I was just going to make do with a frozen meal in the microwave."

Hannibal's smile doesn't falter, but the grimace he's clearly *feeling* twitches a nerve at the corner of his left eye. "Then I am glad to have spared you from such horrors."

Will finds himself grinning at that, one arm folded across his chest and propping up the elbow of the other. The smooth cool curve of his glass pressed against the amused swell of his cheek. "The sincerity with which you condemn my culinary choices has been noted."

He's pleased to catch the twinkle in Hannibal's eyes that shows the amusement is shared before Hannibal's attention returns to the chopping board before him, the steady *click-click* of his knife soothing in its domesticity. "I strive for an element of sincerity in all aspects of my life."

Click-click.

"...At least a little truth in everything," Will says ponderingly.

It sounds like both an exhausting and a liberating way to live, the same way an oyster can turn a grain of sand into a pearl. A single grain of honesty in everything can be built up by layers of nacre into something beautiful - but it's still an irritating imposition stuck in the oyster's craw which may get the oyster killed one day by divers looking for riches.

A little truth in everything. In the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly.

Hannibal catches the odd note in Will's tone. "Does truth often trouble you, Will?"

"I keep going back to the Ripper's truths," Will says. When quiet moments press in on him, he can still hear gentle ringing of the Pagoda's windchimes. "He used literal ones to suggest the metaphorical, taking the victim's lungs and tongue to suggest the one he built his den for had robbed him of breath and speech."

"Troubles with the former usually preclude the latter," Hannibal points out with all the dryness of a former surgeon.

"I can't help but feel the Ripper's missing out on some of his *own* truths," Will says, setting down his drink to run his damp hand back with some frustration through the tangle of his

hair. “I’ve tried explaining my thoughts to Jack, but I don’t think he gets what I mean. Hell, *I* barely get what I mean.”

Hannibal studies him thoughtfully for a moment, and then sets down his knife. All ears. “What is it that’s confusing?”

“Mixed signals. The Ripper built a den and showed it to his intended - the *world,* through Freddie Lounds -, which is usually one of the last stages of a courtship. He took organs from his proxy to show how his intended affected him - but he left the *heart* behind, arguably the most potent symbol of romance in the western world.

Hannibal, I *felt* the strength of the Ripper’s emotions when I mentally reconstructed the scene, but - at the final hurdle - he seems not to have followed them through to the most probable conclusion. A romantic or sexual declaration. Some symbol of *permanence.*”

Will shifts his weight from one foot to the other suddenly, belatedly realising just after the fact that he has all but stamped his foot like a child in his frustration at being confused. He lifts his chin - and eyebrows - at Hannibal pointedly, all but challenging his host to comment on it, and continues, “Who builds a den for someone without feeling for them in their heart?”

Hannibal -

Hannibal hardly seems to have noticed Will’s flash of petulance, a strange kind of blankness settling on his expression that Will can’t make heads or tails of.

“You feel the display lacks sincerity,” he says, and Will, hesitatingly, nods. “Few would offer their heart without some sign their affections might be reciprocated.”

“You think the Ripper’s waiting for a sign?”

“People call with the expectation of an answer. Every heart sings a song, incomplete, until another heart whispers back.” Hannibal turns away to fetch two half-prepared plates from the side-counter, and Will does his best to not feel - somehow, strangely - chided. As though Hannibal is disappointed by the slant of Will’s thoughts or the muddled nature of his vision. “Those who wish to sing always find a song. At the touch of a lover, everyone becomes a poet.”

“I can’t speak for poetry, but the Ripper definitely had a song to sing,” Will says, and debates picking up his cordial/lemonade again for something to do with his hands whilst Hannibal is preparing their meal. (Would Hannibal even let him help with the cooking?) “The tableau represented a nursery rhyme: *Lavender’s Blue.*”

“There are worse choices,” Hannibal says lightly. “Imagine if the Ripper had chosen to work with *Incy Wincy Spider.*”

Will shudders, the immediate image of a corpse with four extra limbs surgically attached to its torso springing to mind, but gurgles out semi-horrified laughter at the same time. Imagining that same corpse working a drainpipe like a stripper pole. Startled by the incongruous baby words *incy wincy* coming out of Hannibal Lecter’s articulate mouth.

The more Will tries to stop his laughter - he's laughing about a *mutilated corpse;* this is not something even people with a good streak of black humour laugh about at length! -, the more hopelessly it bubbles out of him, an utterly inelegant, *unsexy* gurgle that spills past the press of his palm against his mouth and fills the kitchen.

Hannibal doesn't help. The menace stands there and grins unrepentantly, all his crooked teeth unashamedly on show in his equally crooked delight at Will's mirth. "Should I inquire as to where your mind has gone, Will?"

Will has stray tears in his eyes, blurring his vision with fluid streaks of electric-light gold. Leaning on the steel kitchen island to support his weight. "Spiders," he tells Hannibal firmly. "*Not* sexy. Stripper spiders made of dead people doubly not so."

Hannibal blinks. And then his grin stretches just a shade wider - "I happen to think that, for a petite dancer, *Incy Wincy* would make a wonderful stripper name."

"Don't," Will groans, as another half-laugh hiccups up his throat.

"*Incy Wincy spider went up the waterspout -"*

"No."

Hannibal's grin and the gleam in his maroon eyes are *evil.* "How many limbs do you suppose are wearing stilettos?"

Will gives in, folds over on the island, and just laughs until he's done.

"How many times must I tell you that you're a terrible person?" he asks Hannibal when he finally lifts his head again, Hannibal beside him now, his hand a warm weight in the small of Will's back, a counterpoint to the good kind of ache blossoming in Will's stomach.

"As you say it like a compliment, dear Will," Hannibal assures him, his fingertips doing a brief little fluttering caress to Will's spine that sends a shiver of pleasure running up Will's back and down again, "I believe always once more."

The starter to their dinner that night - because *of course* there's a starter - is beef tongue with a sauce of horseradish and heavy cream. The tongue is already carved and artfully plated on the two half-prepared plates Hannibal has brought over beside Will, so all that is left to do is make the sauce and dollop it on the meat.

As soon as Hannibal opens his jar of gourmet horseradish sauce however -

Will's (still sore) stomach lurches at the smell, and *not* in a nice way. Bile burns up his throat, and Will bolts out of the kitchen and along the hallway to Hannibal's nearest bathroom.

Will has absolutely no compunctions about flinging himself down onto his knees in the bathroom and clutching the toilet whilst he loses what little he actually has in his stomach; Hannibal's bathroom is so ruthlessly, gleamingly clean that Will could probably eat his dinner off the toilet bowl. The deep pile bath mat is ridiculously soft under his knees as well, so,

discomfort about being ill in front of other people aside, Will would like to award Hannibal's downstairs guest bathroom 5 out of 5 stars: best bathroom Will has ever hurled in.

After a few - long (everything feels long when you're vomiting repeatedly) - moments, Hannibal appears in the doorway that Will had left open behind him. Fresh glass of water in his hands and expression concerned.

"I see your flu is persisting."

"I see your powers of observation remain unparalleled, Dr. Lecter," Will groans to the toilet bowl.

Rather than taking it as an insult, Hannibal huffs out a laugh. Crouching down beside Will on the floor and, after setting down the water, reaching out to rake back the strands of Will's hair that are sticking to his now-clammy cheeks and forehead.

There is something very soothing about the light scratch of Hannibal's nails over Will's scalp, and Will's eyes flutter closed for a moment or two to enjoy the sensation. The way Hannibal's hand slips down to cup his nape comfortingly afterwards, thumb rubbing at Will's back.

"Are you finished?" he asks Will gently.

"...Dunno," Will confesses after a brief internal consideration of his rebellious digestive system, lifting his head. No more gurgles. "Probably."

Hannibal presses the water into his hands - and another brief kiss to Will's forehead. "Best you stay here for a few more minutes to be sure." He rises, putting down the toilet lid and flushing it. "Sip that - *slowly.* I'll return presently."

Feeling a lot like a sickly, crotchety child - again -, Will does as he's told and remains where bid. Sipping his water and wondering, just a little moodily, why Hannibal hadn't brought him a luxury bendy straw as well.

Hannibal returns just over five minutes later - still wearing his apron -, offering Will a hand to guide him up from the floor and out of the bathroom. Will finds himself leaning his weight on the beta's arm a little more than he would usually, and so cannot fail to notice when Hannibal turns his head against Will's hair for a moment, taking a just-audible sniff.

"...Did you just smell me?"

"Difficult to avoid," Hannibal says, and Will frowns at him. "I really must introduce you to a finer aftershave. That smells like something with a ship on the bottle."

"I keep getting it for Christmas."

"Beside the nausea, have your other symptoms gotten any worse lately? More frequent?"

Will thinks about that for a few seconds. "...Yes, actually."

“I’d change the aftershave.”

Will scowls, but continues leaning on Hannibal as Hannibal directs him along the hallway to some kind of living room. Sitting room? Drawing room? The room probably has a technical name only rich people use, but it also has low warm lamplight and a very soft sofa for Will to sink down into.

The half-empty glass of water in Will’s hand is switched out for a lightly-steaming mug of something the semi-clear colour of dark caramel - and the scent of caramel’s sweetness too, albeit mixed with spice.

“A ginger and caramel tea,” Hannibal explains, sinking down in the seat next to Will as Will cradles the mug to his chest, breathing in the steam. “It should do something about your unsettled stomach.”

Will hums his gratitude and sips at his new drink. (With all the liquids he’s imbibing, he’s probably going to need the toilet again soon - this time for its general intended purpose.) Sweet ginger washes the taste of everything else out of his mouth.

“Nausea tends to worsen with poor sleep and stress, Will. Have you considered taking a few days off work to finally try and shake your bug?”

Will swallows and scoffs. “More time off? With a *Ripper* case at work? Jack would throw a fit.”

The soft light of the living room lamps smoothes out the harsher angles of Hannibal’s face, but it enlarges the shadows as well. When Hannibal frowns, the natural pout of his lips is exaggerated into a dark sweep of shadow across his face.

“Will, beside the frequent vomiting, you’re noticeably haggard and pale. You’ve clearly lost weight since I saw you last, and you’re borderline feverish. Sleepwalking. You need time to recuperate, or this will only get worse.”

Will opens his mouth to say something - he doesn’t even know what himself - but Hannibal cuts him off.

“Jack Crawford was doing his job quite successfully for many years before he dragged you into the field to consult for him. I am certain he can continue to do his job with just as much success for a few days without you, Ripper or not.”

Will closes his mouth. Still cradling his mug, he risks a direct glance at Hannibal’s face. Eyes.

Wide dark pupils. Red-brown irises flecked with whiskey gold and drifts of colour like dried blood and rubies.

Fondness. Care. *Concern.*

Will sighs, letting his shoulders rise and fall with the movement of his lungs. “I’ll think about it.”

Hannibal nods, accepting that that is as much of a concession he is likely to get from Will for now and turning to a nearby coffee table (a large beautifully patterned monster that looks like an antique - lacquered, of course, so Will doesn't dare to touch it even with his fingertips). "I've brought you some things that may help you with your nausea regardless. Have you heard of acupressure?"

"Like, acupuncture?"

"Acupressure arose alongside the form of traditional Chinese medicine known as acupuncture, yes," Hannibal says, weird bands of material that look a little like hair ties now laying in his lap. "Both rely upon the manipulation of what are called acupoints across the human body. Acupressure, you will most likely be glad to know, does not use needles."

"Getting stabbed does sound like poor therapy," Will allows, and covers his smile with the rim of his mug when Hannibal gives him an indulgently exasperated look.

"Though there are problems with many of the clinical studies that have been done to assess the medical usefulness of acupressure, there is still some suggestion that the manipulation of a particular acupoint has some effect - even if it is only a placebo effect - on patients struggling with nausea." Hannibal reaches out, his hand hovering an inch away from Will's closest wrist. Waiting for permission. "May I?"

Will transfers his tea to a one-handed hold, and amiably hands possession of his other hand to Hannibal.

With a doctor's confidence, Hannibal turns Will's arm so that his palm is facing towards the ceiling, Will's fingers a loose, relaxed cup holding nothing but his own curiosity. Tucks his right arm through Will's left, so Hannibal's right hand acts for Will's during the demonstration.

Three of Hannibal's fingers - index, middle and ring - are laid across Will's wrist, then replaced firmly by Hannibal's thumb on Will's inner arm beside where his index finger had been. Right below his scent gland.

"If you press here," Hannibal explains, Will too busy staring at where his own pulse is beating through his skin against Hannibal's touch, "you should feel two large tendons directly beneath your thumb. This acupoint is known as P-6, Pericardium 6, or *Nei Guan.* You can apply firm - but never so hard it hurts - pressure here for a few minutes, gently moving your thumb, and it may potentially alleviate some of your nausea. Alternatively, I brought you some acupressure bands you might like to wear."

Thus explaining the 'hair ties': black knitted elasticated wristbands with a small stud sewn on their insides. To wear them correctly, Will should apparently place the stud directly over the P-6 acupoint, the elastic in the bands keeping the pressure in place around his wrists.

"They're not terribly fashionable," Hannibal says, "but they should fit under your watch."

Will eyes the wristbands a little dubiously. They could, he supposes, pass as a sweatband of some sort, but someone will no doubt pass comment if they catch him wearing sweatbands

under the sleeves of his shirts and blazers at work. *Still* - "Thank you."

The wristbands go in Will's pocket.

"Should traditional medicine fail you…" Hannibal scoops another something much more recognisable from the fancy coffee table this time: a pill bottle, unmarked. It rattles when he shakes it, half-full of tiny oval pills. "Antiemetics. You can take one of these a day, but I must insist that, if you do, you reduce your caffeine intake to no more than two cups of coffee - or another highly caffeinated beverage of your choice - a day, and refrain from drinking alcohol entirely."

His mouth full of more tea, Will grimaces at the command. He can cut out the booze for a little while, but cutting back on his coffee when Jack wants the team all working long hours on the Ripper case?

Apparently reading Will's thoughts on his face, Hannibal tips his head, one eyebrow raised. "Would you like one now?"

...This flu better clear up quickly.

Will sighs, nods, and accepts the tiny pill Hannibal tips out into his palm with another quiet *thanks*. Swallows it down with ginger and caramel as his coffee is now rationed.

"Sorry about dinner, by the way."

"The dinner is fine, Will. We can go back to it once you've finished your tea, if you would like." Hannibal considers, clearly recalling the way Will had run out of the kitchen at the smell of the horseradish - "With a slight adjustment to some of the ingredients, I think."

Thank God.

The table in the dining room, when they move to it, is a picture of nature by a stream in some sunny country. A glass vase filled with smooth river pebbles and tree branches still bearing small green citrus fruits takes pride of place in a row of green succulents in little white planters, all of them anchoring a carpet of large, glossy green leaves and a table runner embroidered with oranges and lemons in gold thread.

Seated at Hannibal's right hand at the table's head, Will has his empty mug of tea replaced with the lemonade/cordial drink again. Fresh ice cubes, and the drink topped up to fizz wildly anew.

Likewise, the horseradish and heavy cream sauce that Hannibal had planned as part of their starter has been switched out for something that makes Will feel much less ill. The beef tongue is served now with cucumbers and a few slices of lightly toasted bread and butter, little half-sandwiches that crunch delightfully under Will's fangs when he takes his first bite.

Probably influenced by the ginger and caramel tea, Will and Hannibal fall into an interesting conversation about tea ceremonies and related cultures throughout the world. The Japanese *chadō* and *senchadō,* the ceremonial preparation of matcha (powdered) and sencha (leaf)

green teas. The Chinese *gongfu cha* with its little teapots of *Yixing* clay, used to offer gratitude, apology and respect. The more easygoing nature, in comparison, of the Korean *darye.*

Between discussing the - occasionally stunning, occasionally crude - craftsmanship of Russian samovars and the delightful delicacies Hannibal had once had served to him in high-class Parisian *salons de thé,* Hannibal vanishes their empty starter plates from the table and replaces them with their mains.

Miso-glazed salmon fillets are finally unearthed as the amazing smell Will had detected when first approaching Hannibal's kitchen that evening, no harm done to them, Hannibal assures him, for finishing their longer time in the oven at a slightly lower heat. A warm winter salad made from segments of oranges, hazelnuts, kale, purple-sprouting broccoli (*rich people broccoli*) and quinoa rounds out the side, all of it deliciously tangy with the orange's juice and tahini.

"Stop waiting for me to purr again or the next time I vomit I'll aim for your lap," Will warns Hannibal darkly when he catches the other man watching him a touch too avidly just as Will forks a chunk of - *ridiculously tasty* - salmon into his mouth.

Hannibal only chuckles, utterly unbothered about being caught, and begins elucidating on the historical indigenous roots of the *chás* - infused beverages - of Brazil.

Will's stomach, aided by the antiemetic, behaves itself, and he clears his plate. Eating the half of a salmon fillet that Hannibal has leftover and offers to him as well, and somehow still finding room for the *mousse au citron* that Hannibal brings out as a light finish to the meal. Scraping the dessert bowl clean with his spoon and refusing to blush when Hannibal catches him sucking the last traces of the mousse from the utensil.

The meal was all, entirely, delicious, and Will tells Hannibal so.

They wash the dishes at the kitchen sink side-by-side, discussing the best flavours of macarons and Catherine de' Medici's introduction of them to France through the Italian pastry chefs she took with her to that kingdom upon her marriage to Henry II. That, of course, turns into a brief history of the Medicis, the dangers of jousting in the early modern era, and a lively debate about the so-called 'code' of chivalry, which tides them over until Hannibal sets the last of the dinner plates, dripping, on the draining board.

"I hope you feel a little better now, Will." Hannibal's apron, tragically, comes off, hung up in a tall cupboard to the side.

Will can tell that his nausea has completely cleared because he can feel the low, pleasant flicker of arousal licking up from his core again, his eyes unable to stop drifting to the flex of the muscles in Hannibal's bare arms, the way Hannibal's clothes mould so lovingly to his form. It doesn't hurt that, for the first time in days, Will can say that he actually feels happy, useful, warm and full. Smiling to himself as he dries the last of their dishes and stacks it with the others for Hannibal to put away properly later. "A million times better, yes. It's amazing what having a good meal inside of you can do for your sense of wellbeing."

“And keeping it there,” Hannibal teases.

Will flaps him with the damp dishtowel. “Don’t mock the suffering,” he chides his host - even as he steps in, cupping Hannibal’s cheek with one hand and leaning up for a brief, grateful, kiss.

They both smell like subtle lemon dish soap, and Hannibal’s mouth is still tart and sweet from the lemons used in the mousse. His hand on Will’s hip is almost reverent, their noses bumping together playfully as Will pulls away with a small, content smile.

“We’re spiteful.”

“Is that supposed to be my warning?” Hannibal inquires, clearly amused. And then, before Will can lean in to kiss him again, mouth turned aside - “A moment. Will, I hope you know that this kind of intimacy is not a prerequisite for us to spend time together.”

Will flounders a little. “That’s- uh, that’s good to know. But if you’ve got no complaints, I wouldn’t mind a little distraction?”

“I believe I can manage distraction,” Hannibal assures him with a smile, taking the dishtowel from Will’s hands to drop it with an uncharacteristic - and thus, ridiculously, *sexy as hell* - lack of care on the kitchen island beside them.

And then immediately crowding Will up against the nearest wall (door. Bit of wall and glass door) with a scorching kiss. A wildfire in the lemon grove, utterly consuming.

“Holy *shit-”* Will gasps as soon as he has air to do so. He can feel the teeth in Hannibal’s grin against his neck, his thighs parted wide as Hannibal’s leg slides up between them and begins grinding *ruthlessly* against his crotch. “O-*oh*, that’s good.”

The kitchen bursts into dizzy gold in Will’s vision as his irises shift colour so fast it *stings*, all his blood rushing south to his crotch, to the thin and tender skin of his throat where his pulse hammers hard against Hannibal's lips. There is no escape from the sudden friction, from the urgent push and grind of all of Hannibal's dangerous heat against him. When Will tries to squeeze his thighs together to control himself the motion only presses Hannibal’s rock-solid thigh further against the growing bulge of his cock, his balls and perineum. The material of Will's trousers is drawn tight by his straining erection beneath it, the way Hannibal’s thigh pushes firmly up against the seam. *Rubs.*

Will is pressed up onto the balls of his feet as Hannibal’s hands find Will’s hips and pull *down,* forcing Will into a rocking straddle as Hannibal all but nuzzles his way into the open collar of Will’s shirt, sucking lazily, provocatively, on the scent gland against Will’s throat.

Will moans and almost slams his head into the wall/door, the ass of his pants squeaking against the glass as he grabs at Hannibal’s hair with his nails, riding Hannibal’s leg shamelessly and feeling the hard line of Hannibal’s cock rubbing against his own hip as well. Will can feel himself leaking inside his underwear, slick dribbling from his hole, dripping from his cock.

Teeth scrape his scent gland like a bolt of lightning - and Will comes. *Hard.* Filling his underwear with jerk after jerk of warm wet slick and spend, his head tipped back in bliss towards the heavens.

Will is still gasping when his brain comes back to him, his legs trembling with aftershocks. If he weren't still straddling Hannibal's thigh he would be on his ass on the floor - *again -,* cringing hard about just coming in his pants with all the speed of a teenager who has just eagerly discovered puberty.

Hannibal kisses his throat again. Again. Will's ear. Laughingly, "I see you required only a short distraction."

Smug asshole. Will lets his claws bite into the back of Hannibal's neck, grumpily rubbing his cheek in a scent-mark against Hannibal's jaw. He can make fun of Will all he likes; Hannibal is still going to spend the rest of the night *smelling* like Will after this.

"One day you're going to realise that comments like that increase only your likelihood of blue balls," Will grumbles, and turns his face into Hannibal's mouth. The taste of his own oils on Hannibal's lips is a pleasant distraction from the slowly cooling mess in Will's underwear. "Take it as a compliment and move on."

"'*Move on,* "' Hannibal muses, his thigh still rubbing back and forth slowly against Will's spent cock through the layers of their clothing, teasing. Friction, *ow.*

Will is close to whining from sensitivity, curling wantonly, pathetically, into the heat of Hannibal's torso. The evidence of Hannibal's rigid arousal is still snug against Will's hip, the spicy heat of his natural beta scent burning through the smell of his cologne.

The power of it rushes to Will's head, to his groin again, a flush he can feel heat him from head to toe. The knowledge of being desired. Slick is leaking from Will anew - and Hannibal can obviously *smell* it, his nostrils flaring and something almost like a growl rumbling through his chest.

"Dare you," Will breathes damply against the corner of Hannibal's open mouth, his words pressed as much to Hannibal's swollen lips as his sharp sharp teeth.

Something snaps, and Hannibal presses Will hard against the wall like a beast and *ruts,* using the bone of Will's pelvis, the curve of Will's leg and waist to get himself off as quickly and efficiently as possible. His leg moving furiously between Will's so that even if the writhing moaning Will were to try and wriggle away the action would grind him against Hannibal, grind Hannibal against him, like two cats - or omegas - in heat.

The polite, well-put-together Dr. Lecter of society has vanished: Hannibal bites at Will's lips when Will offers them, his hair dishevelled in his eyes and his shirt and waistcoat sticking to his back with sweat.

Will bites him back and revels in the snarl that thrills through both of them for it, his fangs sharp on the thumb Hannibal hooks into the corner of Will's mouth to hold him open for ravaging. Dragged along again at Hannibal's pace, a physical response *forced* out of Will

until he finds himself spasming into orgasm again, his genitals and inner thighs chafed raw from the friction against them.

Another load of wetness gushes into Will's underwear, and Will is already grimacing about it as Hannibal growls, groans and climaxes, his face to Will's shoulder and his hips still working in little rabbiting thrusts against Will's until they gradually slow and stop. Both of them are panting, their hearts still thudding hard against each other's, and the world is so full of gold Will might as well have drifted down to the very bottom bed of a sweet amber sea.

"...I'm going to have to wear my softest underpants for at least a *week,*" Will nonchalantly informs the ceiling as soon as he has regained enough breath to do so.

After a beat of silence, Hannibal's shoulders start to shudder with his laughter. He looks up, hooking Will with all the soft fondness of his eyes, the gold of Will's vision turning him, everywhere, to precious filigree. "If you think *that* is a terrible burden, darling, please imagine the conversation I'm going to have to have with my dry-cleaner."

"Like you wouldn't win a stare-off with *Medusa,*" Will scoffs, pushing back some of the hair that has fallen into Hannibal's face as a result of their exertions. It's so soft. It's so pretty. It falls back into Hannibal's face again immediately. "I'm not always sure who suffers the consequences of your actions, *Dr. Lecter,* however ill-thought some of them might be, but I'm pretty sure that it's not *you.* "

Hannibal kisses his fingertips like the act is a benediction. "*I'm* being blamed for this?" He looks delighted by the idea.

"Absolutely."

Hannibal shifts his leg to - finally - let Will put his weight back down fully on his own two feet again - and grins shamelessly at the *squeeaak* Will's ass makes as it slides down his glass door. "The wonders of omega biology also seem to have contributed. Twice, Will? And in such quick succession."

Will frowns at him (and refuses to glance back behind himself to see if his slick and sweat have left streaks on the glass). "I'm not answering that just to stroke your ego."

Hannibal cups the back of Will's neck and kisses him again. His swollen mouth still tastes like lemons and cream - and now, coppery blood. His throat…

Hannibal's face and throat still smell like his own natural spice and amber cologne - and now, enticingly, *Will.*

Will finds himself shivering with *another* burst of arousal, soft-mouthed and damp-eyed when Hannibal lifts his head from their kiss. Heat spotted in his cheeks.

The pupils of Hannibal's eyes explode into vast black holes at the sight, black mirrors for Will to see his own wanton reflection in. Golden eyes like stars there. Supernovas.

“Again?” Hannibal inquires, the deepened timbre of his voice dipping down into the hot black depths of Will’s belly and scraping him inside out.

Again, again - please, and again.

Will lifts his chin defiantly, even with the blush still hot in his face. “Is the professed *hedonist* going to scold me, or is he going to escort me up to his en-suite to deal with it?”

Hannibal smiles at him wryly - *touché* - , but accepts Will’s point. Placing his hand low on Will’s back, he does, indeed, escort the way, and the kitchen goes dark behind them.

Chapter End Notes

Croquembouche: (from French *croque en bouche,* ‘crunches in mouth’) a cone-shaped tower of - usually cream-filled - choux pastry puffs/profiteroles, bound together and decorated with threads of caramelised sugar. In France and Italy, the dessert is commonly served at weddings, baptisms and first communions.

The working summary for this chapter was: Hannibal takes the time to process his emotions. What the *fuck,* Hannibal?

I did not make up the name of the Garrett-Jacobs Mansion. It exists in Mount Vernon, Baltimore, and really is the home of the Engineer’s Club. In 2013, the BCO were the artists-in-residence there, and (according to the internet) at 7.30pm on the 22nd of November, 2013, there really was a concert performance of *Norma* followed by a silent auction. I could even tell you the name of the soprano, but, as a still-living individual, I thought it would be a little rude to assign her a secondary gender and plop her in an omegaverse fanfic, so the soprano here is completely fictional.
On the zillion-to-one chance the original rl soprano ever actually reads this: ma’am, I’m sure you were spectacular.

Thanksgiving falls on the fourth Thursday of November for Americans. In 2013, this was the 28th of November, which was also the first day of Hanukkah (which began on the evening of the 27th and lasted through to December 5th). One of the names used/mooted for this phenomenon was Thanksgivukkah.

Every heart sings a song, incomplete, until another heart whispers back. Those who wish to sing always find a song. At the touch of a lover, everyone becomes a poet. – Plato

The grub:
Beef tongue with horseradish (this recipe comes from one of Hannibal’s cards in the show)
Warm winter salad
Miso-glazed salmon
Mousse au Citron (Lemon mousse)

pain perdu

Chapter Summary

A long night and an early morning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday night makes a fortress of Hannibal's kitchen against the November chill. The lights of his home and the warm scent of buttery pastry baking in the oven press back against the encroaching darkness, even as the earthy smell of mushrooms, of fresh herbs and spices, leave their shadows in the lines of Hannibal's palms. A future easy enough to trace should Hannibal feel so inclined, a life's story folded around the blade in his hand as he carves the fresh tomato on the cutting board in front of him into a bleeding, blooming rose.

One bloom to another, Alana seems amused when she glances up from her chopping and dicing at the butcher's block and spies the flowers Hannibal is creating to nestle on their soon-to-be dinner plates. The wryly fond twist to her mouth is the one she wears when she is both delighted by Hannibal spoiling her with beauty and wondering why she had been surprised, after how long they have both known each other, that Hannibal is spoiling her so. A smudge of flour on her cheek highlights its curve: lacking a little in finesse but still sweet, Hannibal smiling back playfully at the spread of Alana's smile. Caught with the indulgently-made tomato flower still in his hands and utterly unrepentant about it.

"One of these days," Alana says, "you're going to make something too pretty to eat."

"Impossible," Hannibal demurs, plating the last rose and then going to the sink to wash his hands. "There exists nothing so rarefied it cannot be consumed, particularly when the only alternative is for it to rot and be wasted instead. Beauty, once consumed, is carried with us always."

Alana considers that, head tilting thoughtfully to one side as she stretches out her neck. Fully recovered now from the blow to her head, though she still frowns at the first mention of Nicholas Boyle. She is concerned about Abigail: the young omega has been set back by the death of her friend, the Schurr girl, apparently, another wave of grief washing over Abigail anew. Battered by the ocean but still standing on the shore.

Strands of Alana's dark hair are escaping the hasty twisted bun she had put them in earlier that evening when she had realised she would be handling pastry, curls now wisping around her jaw and temples in the heat of the kitchen. The small gold hoops of her earrings gleam in time to the soft cracks of her spine, percussion to the piano notes of Chopin's *Preludes* currently playing over Hannibal's sound system.

No. 13 in F-sharp major, a slow near-nocturne in miniature with dreams of ecstasy. A wistful prayer into the dusk, into the late autumn darkness huddled close against Hannibal's windows.

Trays of already-cooked food cover the counters. The oven has been going for some time baking a series of pastries: beef wellingtons and squash, sage and chestnut rolls. Both will be included in the Thanksgiving hampers Hannibal gives out annually in thanks to the workers he has contracted - or otherwise received - services from throughout the year.

With caterers, musicians, florists, postal workers, refuse collectors, cleaners and gardeners, amongst others, to gift - and thus, quite a few hampers to prepare -, Hannibal had cajoled Alana's assistance for that evening in his kitchen. Alana's culinary talents are not as refined as Hannibal's own but she is skilled enough for the task at hand, and the pleasure of her lovely, intelligent company enlivens even the most monotonous of chores.

In addition to the pastries (which will be added once cooled), the hampers are stocked high with artisanal chocolates, breads and cheeses, fruit - both fresh and dried -, and little pots of homemade jams, chutneys and chicken liver pâté. (Possibly more than a *little* of the latter. The retinol levels found in liver are too high to be safely consumed by pregnant individuals, so Hannibal has been trying to use up the last of the liver in his fridge. He has to mind his recipes even more stringently now.)

"Making the world more beautiful, one tomato bouquet at a time," Alana teases him, tucking back her hair.

Hannibal dips his head in agreement - *just so* -, already heading for his fridge. The kitchen really is rather warm now, for all Alana is wearing a sleeveless red dress under the apron he had given her to use. "I've been unspeakably rude. I haven't offered you a drink."

"I appreciate beer more than wine."

"It's not what you appreciate; it's *that* you appreciate." Hannibal retrieves one of the plain bottles he had placed in his fridge earlier, turning around to show it to his guest. "A compromise? Beer brewed in a wine barrel. Two years. I bottled it myself."

Intrigued, Alana steps around the butcher's block to meet Hannibal halfway. "I'm impressed."

Hannibal pours out the beer for her and hands Alana the glass, waiting expectantly for her opinion. Whilst he drinks it upon occasion, beer is not Hannibal's preferred beverage of choice, so Alana's input would be appreciated to refine his recipes for the tastes of the more common zythophile.

Like a true connoisseur, Alana has a quick sniff of her glass before she takes a swig, swishing the beer around her mouth for a few moments. Her eyelashes flutter as she considers the taste. Swallows.

"A cabernet sauvignon wine barrel?"

Hannibal smiles at her fondly, setting down the beer bottle on the butcher's block for Alana to help herself to the rest of its contents as she pleases before returning to his work at the island counter. "I love your palate."

"I love your *beer*," Alana says quite sincerely, considering the drink in her hands. "I taste oak." She looks at Hannibal as though to confirm her guess before asking herself more quietly, "What else do I taste in there?" Another swig of the beer.

"I will only answer that yes or no."

Alana smiles at him indulgently as she puts her glass down out of the way, choosing to let the mystery lie so she can return to chopping vegetables. "Stocking up for your next dinner party?"

"No," Hannibal informs her, dicing the liver that will form the starter of their own meal that night into bite-size pieces. The dark flesh yields like butter under the edge of his blade. "This is your reserve."

Alana's expression goes softer still, obviously flattered though her brows jokingly raise. "My own private reserve? Why, thank you."

"In exchange for Sous-Chef services."

"Most would consider the food payment enough," Alana says, "...so I'm no doubt going to appear terribly greedy in a moment or two when I ask you for a favour."

Hannibal glances at her inquiringly.

"My brother has invited me to visit him and his family over Thanksgiving, making a four/five-day weekend out of it. But I have a guest-lecture at Quantico on Monday."

The liver pieces are coated in a dry mix of flour, chopped dill weed, salt and pepper. "And you're wondering if I would be available to cover it."

"Available/amenable, yes."

Internally, Hannibal considers his schedule. "The Academy has no complaints about the substitution?"

"As long as my specific topic gets covered by someone knowledgeable in the field, no. Especially not when the knowledgeable one has already been vetted and is Dr. *The Evolutionary Origins of Social Exclusion* Lecter." Alana shakes her head, smiling ruefully. Her knife clicks as she sets it down again. "They'd be getting a dollar instead of a dime."

"You sell yourself short," Hannibal chides.

Alana has a bright mind still, and undoubtedly much more to contribute to the world. It is not her fault that Hannibal is the older and more experienced of the two of them in their field. She will have time - fate and circumstances allowing - to catch up.

“Anything for a vacation,” Alana says with a huff of laughter at herself. She picks up her beer again, bringing it around the butcher’s block and standing across the kitchen island from Hannibal. “I’m doing the same lecture tomorrow, just after lunch, if you’d like to come sit in?”

“I believe I can rearrange my schedule,” Hannibal agrees. More than happy to take the opportunity these days to wander the vaunted halls of the FBI. “For both tomorrow and Monday.”

Almost unseen tension eases from Alana all over, relief dipping her head with gratefulness and wreathing her in another smile. “Thank you, Hannibal. You really are a life-saver.”

“Nothing quite so dramatic these days.”

For a moment, looking at the pale expanse of Alana’s neck and the dark curls of hair wisping around it, Hannibal sees someone else standing in her place. Filling the kitchen with ozone, smoke and sweetness, the taste of tart lemon on his tongue.

Hannibal allows himself to blink and his vision clears, Alana before him again in her red dress, her white borrowed apron tied in the front with a bow. The pang that flits briefly through his ribcage at the shift is not lost on him, though the stray feeling is perplexing. “Does Jack Crawford know you’ll be gone? I had assumed the FBI would be all hands on deck, as it were, with the Ripper scene found so recently in Patterson Park.”

Alana takes another swallow of her beer before answering, clearly fortifying herself. “Jack seems to be keeping his team pretty busy, yeah. But the last time I was asked to consult on the Ripper case was with Miriam Lass -” she clarifies immediately at the querying tilt of Hannibal’s head - “before she disappeared.”

“The FBI Academy student?” The Ripper’s ninth - assumed - victim, though her body has never been found.

“Jack was training her personally.”

“Very sad,” Hannibal murmurs, coating the last piece of liver in his flour mix.

The wellington that the two of them will be having for their main course that evening has a limited time left in the oven, so the meat for their starter will need to go into the pan soon. Something simple tonight: crisp lemon liver and bacon with toasted bread and a small side salad. The tomato roses, some kale.

“You had me examining Ph.D. candidates that week,” Alana says, reminiscing now.

“And I’m grateful you were examining Ph.D. students and not the Ripper.” Hannibal washes his hands clean again. Allowing his tone to turn playful: “You realise those candidates thought we were having an affair.”

Alana’s smile is almost incredulous when Hannibal turns around to look at her again, asking herself whether Hannibal really is bringing up this topic between them - and *like* this. Like

another secret little joke between them, Hannibal's fringe falling soft into his eyes where the day's product has lost its grip.

Drying his hands, Hannibal looks at her directly. "Why didn't we?"

"You were *already* having an affair," Alana informs him, grinning, amused by Hannibal's brazen cheek and mock-scolding him for it. Indulgent of Hannibal's occasional bad habits since she sees so few of them so infrequently.

Hannibal ponders that accusation for a moment, flicking through a drawer in one particular room of his memory palace for a matching face and name. Omega. Male. They're still in touch. "...So I was."

Alana laughs at him. Both the topic and the alcohol have brought a lovely pink flush to her cheeks, her voice going sweet as she idly remarks, "Will does that, too, you know."

"What?" Hannibal smiles back, teasing, "Have affairs?"

Alana has known Will much longer than Hannibal, and Hannibal is curious about what tales she could tell of their mysterious mutual friend.

"Flirtatiously change the subject. You have that pathology in common." Alana speaks of Will so sweetly still, the dreamy floral rainfall of her natural scent wafting gently around her as her thoughts turn to the omega.

"Or we just have you in common," says Hannibal.

A burner on the stove is flicked to life. Bacon is laid carefully into a pan to crisp.

"I recall, even before I met Will, you never spoke about him."

Alana sighs. "Probably because I just want everybody to leave him alone."

Hannibal does not frown, but something sharpens in his gaze enough that Alana finds it necessary to explain herself, her eyes lowering from his with a kind of resigned shame.

"It's not even about Will."

The bacon sizzles and spits, and the *Preludes* quiet for a moment as they change tracks. An evident silence in the kitchen waiting to be filled.

Alana turns the glass in her hands, worry creasing the corners of her mouth. "Hobbs was just a trial run. Jack's obsessed with the Chesapeake Ripper and he's obviously grooming Will to catch him."

And Alana disapproves.

Hannibal nods in sympathetic understanding, turning the bacon in the pan as Alana takes another steadying swig of her beer. "And I sincerely hope he does."

Night. Black. The moon a shiny silver dollar, a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas. The empty road a ribbon of moonlight, rippling in the darkness, shifting like sand under Will's feet. The air is cold and hurts his chest - and it tastes like blood and lavender.

He must keep walking.

Something walks with Will in the night: behind him, lumbering. Step matched by step with steady scraping clack. Hooves, unshod. Weight behind them.

Pebbles and stray tarmac scatter, a background percussion to the *thump-thump* of the heartbeat that is humming in Will's ears. The *whoosh* of breaths in and out - *his* breaths, inside going out. Outside… outside, something breathes, damp and rank, against the long bare nape of Will's neck.

The sky is humming, *shhhh.* Barely audible: the white noise of the universe.

The moon bobs and weaves giddily when Will looks up at it, refusing to be pinned in place. It dances amongst the clouds even when Will brings himself to halt, taking its light and the otherwise endless road with it each time it ripples out of place. Blink-*shutter*-blink. *Shhhh.*

The footsteps stop. In the darkness, the thing that walks behind Will nudges his arm. Warm, damp, velvet as the night. Will should keep walking. As long as the creature walks behind him, he -

The road blurs, melting itself into a silver sea. *Sh-shh-shhhh.* Lights red and blue flashing their way towards Will, another barque passing in the night. Blink-*shutter*-

Headlights glare. Will's eyes burn with pain when the beams cut into them, and he instinctively raises his arm to shield his face from the sudden blare of light. Almost stumbling when he twists his head away from the approaching lights, the world rocking like the deck of a ship under his unsteady feet.

What…?

A tarmacked road and the scrubland around Will is lit up in the constant flashing of red and blue: the lights of a police car. Will would know those colours anywhere; he'd spent enough time in the NOPD. The way the lights stab through closed eyelids on a dark, tired night. The way rural road tarmac crunches under tyres as a police cruiser rolls to a stop.

"Are you lost?"

Two police officers have stepped out of the car, more blurry shadows with flashlights to Will's still-watering eyes than anything else. Faces and voices carefully, obviously neutral,

undecided yet as to whether they should be suspicious or concerned.

Silhouetted by headlights, Will can hardly look at them. Reeling. “What...?”

What the fuck is- where- *why…?*

“What’s your name?” asks the same police officer who had already spoken, obviously catching sight of the clear confusion on Will’s face.

“Will Graham,” says Will, his voice still rough with sleep, because that is at least one question he actually *can* answer.

Standing barefoot in the middle of an unknown road in the middle of the night wearing only the boxer shorts and t-shirt he had worn to bed, Will’s *name* is something he can cling onto. The darkness has not (yet) swallowed him whole.

Had- had he sleepwalked? All the way out here? How had he…?

“You know where you are, Mr-Mstr. Graham?” asks the officer, just a shred of sympathy now in his voice after picking up Will's scent. A helpful shadow, edges all wrong in the darkness, pitying the confused omega who *must* have something wrong with him to be outside in the November night in only his underthings.

Blood. And lavender. And an icy cold numbness setting in.

“No,” Will admits. The word aches in his chest.

“Where do you live?”

“Wolf Trap, Virginia.”

“We’re in Wolf Trap. So that’s good. You’re close to home.” Small mercies. Will is too tired, too disorientated, to bristle at the slightly patronising note of ‘comfort’ in the cop’s tone. “Is that yours?”

Will’s gaze follows the beam of a flashlight over his shoulder.

Winston is waiting for him there, the dog’s fluffy brindled tail starting to swish the moment Will looks at him, delighted to be acknowledged at last. His big dark doggy eyes full of concern.

He’d followed Will out into the night, along the weary winding road.

A lump sticks in Will’s throat anew. “Hi, Winston.”

Winston rushes forward to press himself against Will’s legs, his warm, furry body an immediate reminder to Will that his own legs are currently bare. And cold. As are his arms. And his feet… Will’s bare feet throb and sting, scratched to hell by gravel and God knows what else.

Will rubs a grateful hand over Winston's head before looking back up at the cops. "Can I sit down? My feet hurt."

The flashlights are lowered again. "Why don't we take you home?"

Must be a quiet night for crime in Wolf Trap.

The officers find Will a shock blanket before he slides into the back of the cop car, the wool just thick enough to be a little protection from the night. Its scent is almost offensively neutral, trace oils from the officer who had handed it to Will - a beta, as it turns out - adding only the faintest scent of coffee to the material, something a little like oak.

Will doesn't particularly care. He has - *chunks* of - gravel to pick out of his feet, and Winston is a warm heavy lump of concern when he hops into the car after Will and immediately flops himself out over Will's lap. The move is a better comfort than the blanket; dragging his hands through the thick fur around Winston's neck soothes both the dog and Will himself, Winston yawning dog-breath contentedly right in Will's face.

The beta police officer remains hovering politely by the still open back door, his partner already heading for the driver's seat. "Are you on any drugs, medications? Prescription or otherwise?" Asking the questions he has to ask for his report.

"No," Will says tiredly. He just wants to get home and check on the rest of his pack, putting a door between himself and the night.

"Have you been drinking?"

"No." Will has been trying to follow Hannibal's advice to reduce his nausea.

"Do you have a history of sleepwalking, Mstr. Graham?"

Will automatically begins shaking his head *no* - before hesitating and amending himself. "Rarely. Not like this. I'm not even sure I'm awake now."

The police take him home, driving slowly up the road to Will's house on his warning that he has six more dogs and may have let them loose by leaving a door open as he'd left on his nocturnal wanderings. The last way Will wants to end this godawful night is for one of his dogs to get hit by a car.

Luckily, most of the pack seem to have behaved themselves in Will's absence, despite the front door to their home yawning obviously wide. Jack and Max are both dozing on the front porch, though their heads lift when they see the police car approaching, quiet little *ruff*s of warning rumbling in their throats. Buster is using his favourite tree in the yard to do his doggy business, self-officiously trotting over to the police car when it rolls to a halt and adding his own little defensive *yip* to Jack and Max's.

Harley, Ellie and Zoe, Will hopes, are still sleeping inside.

"Quite the little family you have here," the cop behind the wheel says to Will, amused at the canine display.

“I rehome strays,” Will explains, and waits for one of the officers to let him - and Winston - out of the back of the cruiser so he can calm all the pack down.

“Your alpha must be a dog-lover too?”

“Wouldn’t consider an alpha who wasn’t,” Will says blandly, and slides out of the car as soon as possible.

To Will’s relief, Harley, Ellie and Zoe are also fine, exactly where he had thought - *hoped* - they might be inside. Dozing, like Jack and Max had been, but quick to wake up and rush towards Will once the police have gone. Butting against his legs. Shoving their snouts into his palms, licking at his bare skin.

Their tails beat against Will’s side like excited metronomes when he crouches down amidst the furry swarm of all seven of his dogs, trying to pet all of them at once, assuring them all that he’s really okay.

Will had worried them.

(Will is worried himself.)

It’s too… late? Early? To sleep. There is too much worried restlessness trapped under Will’s skin to allow him to sleep now anyway. So he deals.

Anxiety is compartmentalised into a series of small tasks, a checklist of simple things Will knows he can do. Will has not lost grip of his life, and he can reward his dogs with treats as an apology for their disturbed night, letting them romp outside near the house under his watchful eye as he bathes his poor, aching and dirty feet in the same battered metal tub he uses to give the dogs their baths. Picking out the rest of the gravel embedded in his soles in the water before rubbing his feet dry, taking care to dry between his toes. Apply iodine ointment. Bandages. Thick soft winter socks.

The dogs get their breakfast early, tags clinking merrily against their bowls as they eat, and Will goes to his bathroom to wash the rest of his body to ‘properly’ start the day.

Clothes stripped off, and deposited in the laundry basket. Sinkful of water. Flannel. Scent-deadening soap -

Will’s hands shake when they reach for the soap, his fingers fumbling - and the bar clatters loudly against the floor. Offensively *bland:* cream, laying there like it has any business being on the tiles.

Will stares at it. Stares down at his hands, eight fingers and two thumbs spread in fans, ten digits shaking so badly he has to hold onto his sink to try and stop the shivering from travelling up his arms. He’s too late, of course; the shuddering is already in the core of him, his foundations crumbling, the tremors spreading through his blood and bones and sinew from the inside out.

The ceiling light buzzes condemnation overhead. Will's reflection cracks apart in his mirror. His hands grip the sink that keeps him standing and he blinks, blinks again -

A blur.

Blink-*shutter*-blink.

Predawn softens the night on the drive to Hannibal's, nautical twilight the same numb grey as the static of Will's thoughts. Will's body holds the vague memories of cold water and deodorant - his skin is still chilled from their cold blasts anyway, and Will doesn't *think* he smells sweaty any more -, but he doesn't quite recall getting washed or dressed or behind the wheel of his car, three-quarters of the way to Baltimore before he realises where he is and what he's doing. On 'waking', Will's shuddering starts anew, and he has to pull over for ten minutes and ground himself, grinding his sore heels into the footwell of his car and yanking at the roots of his hair.

What is *wrong* with him?

It's still appallingly early when Will parks his car outside of Hannibal's Mount Vernon home - and yet, still tangled up in the grey buzzing anxiety of his own brain, Will somehow manages to forget this until the precise millisecond *after* he has just pressed Hannibal's doorbell. The sonorously chiming *ding-dong* of the bell is horrifyingly loud in the otherwise fairly still and quiet Baltimore air, startling birds singing their morning songs in the nearby trees and gutters into outraged flight.

Will cringes. Will cringes, but doesn't dare turn tail and flee because the only thing he can think of that would be ruder than waking Hannibal up at this hour is waking Hannibal up at this hour for *nothing,* and the doorbell has already been rung.

Will is *still* cringing when Hannibal answers the door several minutes later in his pyjamas and a dressing gown, eyes half-lidded and hair still loose and soft over his forehead. Clearly having just rolled out of bed. Frowning - though his frown fades immediately when he realises it is Will who is standing on his doorstep.

"Will?"

"I'm sorry," Will blurts out. "I was on the road and I was just *here* -"

"Will," Hannibal says again, cutting Will's rambling short and opening his door wider. "Come in."

The story of Will's night seeps from the omega like pus from an infected wound: sleepwalking, the thing that had walked behind him, the road, the police car, Winston, the dogs, the drive. Will's breakdown unspoken but hovering between words. Still jittery, Will's shoulders are hunched and his eyes dart about their surroundings like he still expects to be pursued by the creature from his dreams. He smells like ozone again, and the salt-sour undercurrent of tears and fearful anxiety.

Brought into the kitchen, the inner sanctum of Hannibal's home, Will relaxes somewhat, though his weight sways on his heels like a tired man still undecided on whether he needs to bolt from the situation at hand. With his injured feet, he *ought* to sit down, but Will resists being herded towards the chair in the corner of the kitchen without even seeming to realise he is doing so.

Hannibal acquiesces to his guest's silent needs and busies himself with his vacuum coffee maker - primarily so that he does not spook Will further by suddenly laying hands on the other man instead. Checking over Will's injuries for himself.

Will had wandered outside - into the dark and the cold and all its dangers, wearing next to *nothing* - in his sleep, with only one loyal dog for protection. He could have been hit by a car. He could have been emotionally wounded by his *dog* being hit by a car. A lone and extremely vulnerable unmated omega, he could have been abducted, maimed, raped, killed…

He has likely caught a chill, if not an actual cold. His feet are definitely scratched bloody, and may become infected without due care.

Hannibal has to close his eyes for a moment, steadying himself against the cold grip of disquiet that is doing its best to climb up his throat. (He owes Winston a whole sausage, if not more.) "Although I may be, is it safe to assume you're not sleepwalking now?"

Will hunches down shamefully into the collar of his jacket again, hiding his neck from the disapproval of a nearby predator. His eyes are fixed on a point at least a metre to Hannibal's left, unable to bring himself to even *look* at Hannibal right now. "I'm sorry it's so early."

"Never apologise for coming to me," Hannibal tells him firmly. He will never turn Will away from his door, no matter the time. "Office hours are for patients. My kitchen is always open to friends."

A brief flare of grateful sweetness touches Will's scent, a darting glance of connection gifted to Hannibal from beneath the lovely trembling sweep of Will's eyelashes.

Hannibal sets the picture in sparkling crystal and places it in perfect morning twilight in his Mind Palace, the drowsy blue-grey of Will's eyes picking out the tints of the sky. The faintest threads of omega gold promising a sunrise, even on a day that may see rain.

To Will, Hannibal hands a glass cup of coffee stirred with sugar and cream - something hot and sweet to settle his jangling nerves. A shield against delayed shock, the fine trembles Hannibal can see still shivering through Will's bones. "Your symptoms are growing worse."

Will's fingers close around his cup like a lifeline, the liquid inside it still swirling, still trying to settle into its final shade. "It's not flu, is it."

"It could be. Complicated by some good old-fashioned post-traumatic stress. Jack Crawford has gotten your hands very dirty."

"Wasn't forced back into the field," Will mutters into his cup, taking a sip. Terrible boy.

"I wouldn't say forced," Hannibal says evenly, stirring cream into his own coffee. Glad he'd put all the hampers he'd assembled the night before out of sight in another room, waiting for the courier to collect them, before going to bed.

Hannibal had actually been awake when Will had rung his doorbell, but not yet risen from his bed. The extra fat content in the cream might work to replace the energy he would have otherwise gained from his rest. "Manipulated would be the word I'd choose. You still haven't taken any time off work, have you?"

"I can handle it," Will says shortly. Taking another, deeper and more disgruntled, swallow of his drink, impervious to the way it might burn his throat and tongue going down.

"'Be strong, saith my heart; I am a soldier;/ I have seen worse sights than this.' Somewhere between denying horrible events and calling them out lies the truth of psychological trauma."

For one solid moment, Will eyes Hannibal directly. Eyes burning blue and gold in the predawn grey of the kitchen. "So I can't handle it?"

Not if the fever Hannibal had scented on him continues in the way Hannibal believes it will. Not if it continues to burn.

"Your experiences may have overwhelmed ordinary functions that give you a sense of control," Hannibal says as neutrally as possible, tasting the flickering scent of ozone that wishes to rise further in Will's scent on the tip of his tongue. Scared? Annoyed? Or both?

"If my body is walking around without my permission, you'd say that's a loss of control?"

"Wouldn't you?" Hannibal inquires, and takes a thoughtful sip of his own coffee. He'd rather it were flavoured with cardamom than ozone this early, but the red flushing high in Will's cheeks with Will's rising tangled emotions is its own kind of nourishment. "Sleepwalkers often demonstrate a difficulty in handling aggression. Are you experiencing difficulty with aggressive feelings, Will?"

Will's gaze slides away from Hannibal again, but he seems to be considering the question. His lips purse. "...If there's difficulty, it's not mine."

Not a denial of aggression altogether. Interesting. "A coat borrowed unintentionally, whose owner now will not accept its return?"

"Return to sender, only the address is an unknown." Will holds his coffee a little closer to himself, nursing the heat of the cup against his thawing heart. "Told the universe I like boats, and it's made me the ferryman. How do I deliver to a dead man?"

Hobbs.

“Do you feel obliged to?” Hannibal asks honestly, his head tilting as he tries to catch the fascinating emotions that flash across the horizon of Will’s face. Adding more good-humouredly, “Charge your due fee and call it an inheritance. They say possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

To Hannibal’s pleasure, Will actually smiles at that. Dawn breaks over Baltimore. “Think the death tax might be a bit prohibitive.”

“Share the burden out then. Donate it to the state.”

Uncertain, Will glances at Hannibal again, his beautiful eyes now wholly a soft, misty blue. Full of shadows scudding across endless lapping lakes. “Does the state deserve that?”

“Do you?” Hannibal asks gently, and sets down his cup. The clear, quiet sound of glass clinking against the steel of his kitchen island. “You stood in the breathing silence of Garret Jacob Hobbs’ home, Will. The very spaces he moved through. Did they speak to you?”

The last of Will’s small smile drops off his face entirely. “With noise and clarity.” His night of lost sleep echoes in the clicks of the consonants in the back of his throat.

“And they haunt you still.” Will doesn’t reply. “You could sense his madness.”

“...I tried so hard to know Garret Jacob Hobbs,” Will explains, quite obviously dredging the words up from a deep, dark well in the middle of himself. Hannibal can see how it wearies him, bringing up these truths hand-over-hand and exposing them to the light. “To *see* him past the glint of slides and vials, beyond the lines of police reports, between the pixels of all those printed faces of sad, dead girls.”

“How did you feel seeing Marissa Schurr impaled in his antler room?”

Will’s eyelashes flutter again like the frantic beating wings of a trapped butterfly. Blink. Blink. Blink. Hannibal wants to brush over them with his thumb, curve his hand around Will’s clenching jaw to feel the grind of bones within.

“Guilty,” Will whispers. A secret.

“Because you couldn’t save her?” Hannibal asks, lowering his own voice in return.

“Because I felt like I killed her.”

Beautiful.

“I got so close to him,” Will says, almost angrily now. Outraged at the intruder that has crossed his boundaries and overstayed their welcome in the depths of his mind. “Sometimes I felt like we were doing the same things at different times of the day. Like I was eating or showering or sleeping at the same time he was.”

“Even after he was dead?”

“Even after he was dead.”

Such *devastatingly* beautiful empathy. With a feverish candle set before it and a limitless supply of fuel, it could reflect an infinite number of futures, one candle becoming an endless wildfire to scour the world’s landscape clean.

Unfortunately taking some less fire-proof things with it that Hannibal cannot bear yet to sacrifice to the flames.

“Was it his shade that followed you down the road last night?”

“I-” Will falters, “uh- no, I don’t think so. It...” he considers, his eyes and mind going far away to the moonlit road he had left behind him, “it had hooves.”

“So not the Mushroom Gardener or the Ripper then either.”

“Not unless the Ripper is a horse,” says Will, yanked back into the kitchen, and snorts. The corner of his mouth curving with a faint wickedness he hardly seems aware of. “And Stammets still isn’t walking, last I heard.”

Vicious boy. Hannibal moves closer to him, unable to resist the impulse to have his hands on Will *somehow* any longer, warmth against human warmth, this utter *marvel* of a soul.

Will unwittingly stalls him again, frowning - belatedly - down at the coffee in his hands with betrayed realisation. “Is this decaffeinated?”

Internally, Hannibal sighs. “Caffeine on an empty stomach would have only compounded your woes.”

“It might have woken me up a bit more as well,” Will grumbles, but doesn’t object when Hannibal leans in closer to him to place his hand, first, atop Will’s own hand, and then against Will’s forehead.

The skin is hotter than it should be, but not yet dangerously high. Will has a fever again.

“A hearty breakfast will also do that and more,” says Hannibal firmly, moving his hand to cup Will’s jaw and lift Will’s eyes resolutely to his own. Will’s pulse throbs under his littlest fingers, Will’s scent blossoming into the air around them both with spice and pine. “If I arrange you an appointment with a neurologist friend of mine, would you agree to see him?”

The enticing spice notes flatline, and a crack of ozone burns Hannibal’s nose like a lightning-struck forest instead.

Will is *crackling* with sudden temper, pulling away angrily from Hannibal’s hand so swiftly some of the coffee left remaining in his cup sloshes over the rim and onto the floor. “Is this because of what I said about Hobbs? You want to study me now like everyone else, *Dr.* Lecter?”

Hannibal frowns, his eyes narrowing at the accusation. “This is because you wandered out into the road in the middle of the night, Will. In your underwear. Whilst asleep. The

temperature dropped below freezing." Ruthlessly driving his point home, "You could have been seriously injured. It is a miracle you - and *Winston* - were not."

Like many of Hannibal's most precious things, a cold almost-winter's night could have swallowed Will Graham and the future growing in his womb whole, and the first Hannibal would have likely known of it would have been a few days later, confusedly wondering why none of his calls to Will's cell phone received a reply. Leaving Hannibal with only a howling absence, the universe too selfish the second time around to even spit out Will's bones.

"You said it was stress," Will says reproachfully, still pulling back from Hannibal. "You said it was *flu.*"

Will wants to be told that what is plaguing him is stress or flu. Simple maladies that can be easily fixed.

"I said it *could* be those things," Hannibal says, refusing to allow the distance to grow between them any further and stepping closer to Will again over the puddle on his tiles. "It could also be something else, Will, and I would like to have that possibility investigated before you walk in front of a car in your sleep."

Will visibly flinches, and Hannibal softens his tone. Reaching out to take Will's cup from him and set it aside on the nearby counter, fingers stroking soothingly over the back of Will's trembling hands. "Please, Will. For my own peace of mind, if nothing else."

"But a *neurologist?* " Will asks him, voice small. Allowing Hannibal's touch once more, the thumb that dares to slip up beneath the sleeves of Will's jacket and shirt and rub slow, soothing circles over the faint swell of his scent gland.

"Your nausea, the sudden onset of somnambulism, your frequent headaches and the constant fever which you have again now… all of these could be the result of something physiological."

Will's scowl - fixed on Hannibal's collarbones - can only be described as petulant. Resistant still. "What are you looking for? Seizures? A tumour? A blood clot? An absence of all of the above so you can label me crazy instead?"

"Will," says Hannibal. Another sharp pang inside his chest: *hurt.*

Immediately chastened, Will's shoulders drop - and his fight with them. "Sorry." He takes a long, slow breath in - count of four - and then lets it all *whoosh* out. "I- *fuck.* "

"It's alright," Hannibal assures him, still rubbing circles against the scent gland at Will's wrist with his thumb. Associating comfort with touch - Hannibal's touch. "This is a distressing topic to consider."

"Shouldn't be taking it out on you, though. You're only trying to help."

"I'm glad you understand that," Hannibal says gently. Then, "I only want what's best for you, Will."

Will lifts his chin again and looks at him. A pause - and then Hannibal abruptly has an armful of Will Graham, the omega's head against Hannibal's shoulder and his hands clutching tight to the lapels of Hannibal's dressing gown. Another lifeline. A clutch for balance.

His arms already instinctively around Will's back, Hannibal remains fixed in place, an anchor to keep Will's little boat from being swept away by the currents life sends his way. Giving Will the emotional space to settle against him, Hannibal's cheek pillowed against the forever-tousled curls of Will's hair.

They stand together like that, silently. Hannibal quite content to do so, breathing Will deep into his lungs. Listening to the soft rush of Will's breathing, in and out, the steady rhythmic pumping of both their hearts. A gentle morning song.

"...This is really soft," Will murmurs after an immeasurable amount of time has passed, tugging lightly on the front of Hannibal's dressing gown. His scent has calmed again, the storm of his emotions passing - for now. Will's cheek rubbing thoughtlessly back and forth against Hannibal's shoulder, marking the material beneath with the soft smoke-sweetness of his scent.

Hannibal lifts one hand to hold him there, palm spread reassuringly over the tender nape of Will's neck. Fingers - just - threaded into the tips of Will's hair to scratch lightly at the scalp beneath. "It's cashmere."

"Huh," Will says. Doesn't stop rubbing his cheek, almost nuzzling into Hannibal's throat when he lifts his chin just so.

Hannibal rewards him with another barely-there scratch of his nails, Will leaning into it beautifully. "Alana has invited me to sit-in one of her lectures at the Academy early this afternoon. How about I bring us both a picnic lunch, and we can discuss your appointment more then?" Hannibal waits, very patiently, for the agreement of Will's tiny nod, the cool tip of Will's nose pressing itself to the warmer column of Hannibal's neck. "What time is your first class today?"

"Uh- 9. 9.30."

"Then we have plenty of time until you have to leave." Time Hannibal intends to use quite wisely, though it may deprive him of the current pleasure of Will's sweetly artless embrace. Will shivering sweetly at the smooth pass of Hannibal's hand down his spine. "How do you feel about crêpes?"

Chapter End Notes

Pain perdu: (lost bread) French toast, called 'lost bread' in France because it uses up bread that has gone too stale for normal eating and would be lost otherwise. Bread slices are soaked in a mixture of (most commonly) whisked eggs and milk before being fried in a pan and served with toppings. *Pain perdu* can be a savoury dish or a sweet one,

though the sweet version - where the bread is soaked in a mixture of eggs, milk, vanilla, sugar, cinnamon and nutmeg before being fried, and served with fruit, syrup, butter and/or cream - is probably the most well known.

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees.
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—
Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door. - Alfred Noyes, *The Highwayman*
Be strong, saith my heart; I am a soldier;/ I have seen worse sights than this. — Homer, *The Iliad*

The crisp lemon calf's liver and chicken liver pâté recipes are both from Hannibal's recipe box.
Beef wellington (for two)
Squash, sage and chestnut rolls

consommé

Chapter Summary

Two classes, a picnic and a trip to the hospital: Will's day goes from bad to worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The Chesapeake Ripper murders in sounders of three."

9.30 am. The handful of Academy students who had still had sleep in their eyes as they walked into Will's lecture hall rapidly wake up the moment the crime scene photographs from the Chesapeake Ripper's tableaux burst into brutal life on the screen at the front of their classroom, the light ruthless against Will's back. Shadows as they are at the corners of his eyes, Will still spies a noticeable straightening of spines amongst his audience: some of the trainees are simply shocked into sitting upright by the savagery before them; some of them - more than a few of them - are puffed up with genuine, occasionally ghoulish, interest. A fair mix.

The Ripper and his distinctive crimes inspire intrigue, and not just among FBI Academy students. More than a few agents in the FBI - or people training to become agents for the FBI - have the dream of being *the* one to finally catch the Chesapeake Ripper, Maryland's most infamous serial killer at large, and Will's lectures on the Ripper are usually ranked amongst his most highly, booked over capacity when opened up to others beside students at the Academy.

With the beginning of another of the Ripper's sounders blazing in the news, the Academy had pressured Will to rework his syllabus to bring his lectures on the killer *du jour* forwards. To prioritise, and urgently educate another group of bright young things in the hopes that *this* time at least one of them will have that moment of blinding brilliance everyone believes is required for the FBI to put the Chesapeake Ripper behind bars at last.

Will pushes himself up from his seat on his desk, the reflection of a bloody-mouthed dead man left sitting in a church pew splashed across the inside lenses of his glasses. Severed tongue left in a bible in the corpse's hands, bookmarked to the first few chapters of James. The Taming of the Tongue.

(*The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.*)

Welcome to damnation. Hell hammers itself a home behind Will's eyes. The Ripper leaves no room for the anxiety of Will's early morning there, and Will's belly has Hannibal's hearty breakfast to gnaw at rather than his own heart.

“He did his first victims in nine days.” Pacing leisurely forwards into his lecture hall, Will gestures at the screen behind him. “Annapolis.”

Click. The photograph on-screen changes to that of a dead woman with her torso carved into an open bowl, a cell phone left in the cavity along with her remaining organs. “Essex.”

Click. A dead man left spreadeagle on gravel, knives driven through the palms of his hands into the ground below him, his eyeballs removed and left balancing a set of scales beside his corpse. “Baltimore.” Will turns back to the screen, completing the circuit back towards his desk. “He didn’t kill again for 18 months and then there was *another* sounder of three in as many days. All of them in Baltimore.”

Click, click, click. Three corpses: missing intestines, tongues, digits. Severed arms left on the table in front of one body.

“I use the term sounder because it refers to a small group of pigs.” A soft murmur greets Will as he turns on his heels back towards his students, a ripple of - dare he hope for it - understanding. “That’s how he sees his victims. Not as people. Not as, ah, prey. Pigs.”

Pens scribble. Laptop keys clack.

“11 months after the sixth victim there was a seventh.” *Click.* Another photograph of another corpse, Will’s pacing beginning anew. “Two days later, the eighth is killed in his workshop.” *Click.* “Every tool on the pegboard where they hung was used against him and, as with the previous murders, organs were removed.”

Click. This time, an illustration of the Wound Man from Hans von Gersdorff’s sixteenth century *Feldtbüch der Wundartzney* - his *Fieldbook of Wound Surgery*. The art bears a - deliberate - striking similarity to the corpse that had preceded it.

“The - uh - removal of organs and abdominal mutilations mean someone with anatomical or surgical knowhow. There... is a distinctive brutality.”

Click. The ID of former FBI trainee Miriam Lass, currently missing. Presumed dead. The alpha woman is smiling in her photograph, sleek blond hair tied back in a bouncy ponytail. She had been Jack’s protégée, Jack’s moment of blinding brilliance made flesh. Before Will.

“An FBI trainee named Miriam Lass was investigating private medical records of all the known victims when *she* disappeared. She’s believed to be the Ripper’s ninth, but no trace of her has ever been found.”

Click. A stark shot of the John Doe left in the top room of the Patterson Park Pagoda, the corpse’s almost fully hollowed-out torso still stuffed with the same lavender that had been used to crown him. Matching coronet still offered out in his uplifted hands.

“The tenth victim. Discovered in Patterson Park, Baltimore, two years later - and three days ago.” Will allows a few brief seconds of hushed whispering from his students - yes, he *is* discussing an active case with them, the one that’s in all the news -, before continuing. “True to his established pattern, the Chesapeake Ripper has remained consistently theatrical.”

Click. A wider shot of the most recent scene, placing the body in context, the corpse and all the accoutrements of the den around it still *in situ.*

Eyes widen in the audience. The photograph on-screen is better than the one that had been featured on *Tattlecrime.*

Will leans against his desk again, letting his gaze sweep demandingly across the shadowed flanks of his students. “Tell me what you see.”

Class participation time.

“Escalation,” one brave soul actually peeps in the front row on Will’s right.

A beta woman with dark hair and a rather thoughtful expression, the trainee wilts a little and tries to instinctively hide behind her laptop when Will turns all his focus on her in response to her proclamation.

“Elaborate.”

Not an immediate dismissal. The trainee remembers she has a backbone. “It’s - um. It’s a bigger scene than the others. More detailed. The Ripper has used props to stage his kills before, but many of his props have- many of the props and weapons used in his kills have been items he would have found at the scene and then used for his own purpose. Items he must have brought himself have been minimal. This scene… does not look minimal.”

“Typically," Will says, "escalation is defined as the tendency for an offender to commit increasingly serious crimes over the course of their active criminal lives. For a killer, this would involve an increase in the brutality used against their victims, a greater number of targeted victims, and/or an increased frequency to their kills.”

None of which apply to the Ripper. The trainee wilts again.

Will sighs, gesturing to the screen over his shoulder. “Your observation is a good one, but it would be more accurate to describe the increase in props to this scene as an elaboration: further clarification to the point being made. Arguably, the Ripper must feel he is making a more important point than usual to explain the change.” Will turns his eyes back on the rest of his class. “What is the point being made?”

“...Surely the *dead body* is the point?” one of Will’s more cocksure alpha students suggests from the back row, lazily waving his pen in the air as though Will is in danger of missing him.

“No,” Will says bluntly, letting his eyes drift away to the rest of his class even before he hears the petulant *click* of his student’s pen being set down again. “The body is merely the writing on the card left with the bouquet. The signature to get our attention - and tell us whose message we’re looking at.

Our victim is a beta male in his mid-to-late forties, currently unidentified - and utterly irrelevant to the scene aside from the part where the Ripper required a corpse. Who this man

is does not matter to the Ripper. What he represents in this tableau does."

A depressing silence.

Will sighs again, and stands. "Look at this scene. Look at its protected location, the abundant provision of luxury soft furnishings - nesting materials, most still waiting to be arranged. The fridge you can see near the door was full of luxury drinks and a range of indulgent high-calorie snacks. I know you've all read the news. Freddie Lounds of *Tattlecrime.*com called this a den, and it is one."

"What's a *beta* doing in a den?" the same alpha student from before asks loudly, clear derision in his tone. A muttered undercurrent from the same: *talk about some B-positive behaviour.*

Will doesn't dignify him with a glance. "If you require instruction on what an adult might get up to in a den, Mr. Allen, you may find a biology and/or sexual health class better suited to your needs than this one."

A ripple of laughter moves through the front two rows of the lecture hall, and, in the back row, the alpha student - Allen - finds himself cast adrift by the two students either side of him, both scooting away from him in their seats.

Will gives them all a moment to settle before continuing. "The question we have to ask ourselves now is: whom is this den for? Was it built for someone in particular, as many dens are, and, if so, is that person now in danger? Could discovering their identity lead us one step closer to finally catching the Ripper?"

Class is dismissed after fifteen more minutes of discussion, with short essays due the following week: analyses of the Ripper's latest tableau. A few students linger afterwards, clearly debating whether they can pick their professor's brains some more, but Will pays them no mind, sweeping the confidential materials he'd used for his lecture into their folder again and heading out of the hall with both his bag and folder under his arm. He has another lecture - the exact same lecture, to a different set of students - in an hour, and needs to use the time between to catch up on his work emails somewhere quiet.

As if just to spite him, the Academy is especially noisy that morning. Will can hear the murmurs of gossiping students even when he sequesters himself in his tiny office with its door shut, a constant susurrance that edges along his nerves and gives him a rising headache from the stress.

In his inbox, FBI Agents Samson and Miceli are politely continuing their (days long, now) entreaty to book an appointment with Will in a break between his classes sometime soon, determined to get his thoughts on the mutilation/murder cold case that Will had so recently written a report on - and that they have both, even more recently, been assigned to re-investigate. Despite Will's insistence that everything the two agents need to know had been in his report, Samson and Miceli beg his time to go through it in-person anyway: oral conversation, they insist, can sometimes prompt ideas in a different way than what is inspired by the written word, and there are apparently a few points in Will's report that the agents would like clarification on.

After one last deep sigh over his keyboard, Will caves and agrees to their request. Agents Samson and Miceli are both young and terribly earnest - and Miceli in particular is young enough Will actually remembers *teaching* her only a few cycles ago. She had been a brighter than average participant in his classes, and the mild terror with which she still regards Will bleeds through her written correspondence -, giving Will some hope that whatever the two agents have to ask him will be both brief, due to dread, and intelligent, if not insightful.

A few more emails and a detour to a vending machine to grab a bottle of water later, Will heads back to his lecture hall.

11.30 am. Something in Will's gut is on edge even before half his students for this class have found their seats, his eyes sharp on the swaggering gait of more than a few of the alphas who come into the hall. The few female omegas in this time slot have instinctively clustered themselves together, their scents thready with disquiet - and almost smothered by the heavier, muskier smell of self-satisfied alpha pheromones building in the room.

Every time Will turns his back on them all, he can hear whispering.

The Academy is always at its busiest - and therefore its most pungent - around midday, but today seems particularly bad. The taste of alpha salt-sour musk starts to clog up the back of Will's throat as he talks, a heavy cloud of scent that only deepens and spreads when the photographs from the Ripper's crime scenes start going up on the screen. There's a lot more fidgeting than usual. From everyone. When Will paces near where the female omegas are sitting he can taste their stress, and, when he turns to look at the rest of his class, still caught in the women's headspace, he has to physically grip one wrist with his other hand to stop himself from instinctively reaching up to nervously cover his throat.

The eyes of many of the alphas in the class have bloomed with - at least - slivers of red. The thinner colouring in the iris allows the tapetum lucidum behind the alphas' retinas to brightly reflect the light from the projector screen - and so their eyes glow predatorily in the dimness of the lecture hall.

Everywhere, pricks of orange-red, like sweeping a flashlight over the surface of the swamp to pick out the eyes of the alligators waiting in the darkness. Hungry.

Will slides back into his own skin with irritation already licking up his spine to join the pounding in his head, his lips peeling back from his teeth as he tersely continues with his lecture.

The Academy needs a better ventilation system if it's going to insist all the trainees go scent-blocker-free. So many alphas - for the FBI and the applicants to join its rank are still, to this day, *predominantly* alphas - packed so close in a high-stress environment, smug about their own achievement in getting so far already, fed on scenes of violence in their studies and then trained further in physical violence...

The building scent-cloud of their pheromones is further contributing to a state where they instinctively continue to put out more pheromones. Assertive. Aggressive. Domineering. Keying each other up.

Reverting to baser instincts.

It *stinks.*

Will takes a seat on his desk and stops turning his back on the room. The constant whispering adjusts itself in response, tracking the turn of Will's head instead as he rakes his eyes across the rows of students before him, Gersdorff's Wound Man projected above and behind him like a suffering saint of old.

Amongst the group of omega women, fidgeting turns into an outright flurry of movement. Will's eyes snap in their direction, ready to reprimand - but smells a hot, musky sweetness barely seconds before he can taste it across the roof of his mouth, a sticky wetness heavily scented with something like coconut and heady florals.

Heat.

One of the women - and the evident source of the scent - has gone tellingly red across her face, hot colour flushing down her throat as she yanks off her bureau-issued sweater to try and cool herself down. To hide her face and her immediate mortification when she realises what her scent is broadcasting to the rest of the room.

Her fellow omega trainees close in ranks around her, offering her a water bottle, checking she's okay - but the woman's eyes are already blazing a bright omega gold, sweat noticeably beginning to dampen the collar of her shirt and between the slope of her breasts. Will - and no doubt everyone else close enough to the affected student - can smell her slick.

"Sir, I- I'm not due for two *weeks,*" she gasps out, embarrassed and apologetic, when Will approaches her seat. "I'm a bit stressed, so maybe my preheat -"

"You may be a bit beyond preheat, Miss Reis," Will says quietly. This close to his student, all he can smell is her heat, the scent of sweat and slick growing stronger by the second. A misty warmth that seeps into the cracks of his thoughts and clouds them. "Don't you?"

Miss Reis has rapidly stormed her way through preheat already, and is increasingly in danger of tipping over into fullblown heat before she can make it out of the classroom. Potentially triggering every other omega there into heat with her, and sending the on-edge alphas into rut.

Reis swallows, her throat and forehead already slick with sweat - but accepts the truth she can no doubt already feel, her hands already plucking nervously at where her clothes are sticking to her. "P-permission to leave, sir?"

"Granted. Miss Young," Will says to the woman sitting beside Reis, waiting a beat for her attention, "please escort Miss Reis to the emergency nesting rooms."

Young nods, already scooping up her belongings and checking the woman beside her has her own.

“You may want to contact your usual heat partner now, if you have one,” Will tells Reis, not unkindly.

Reis and Young swiftly leave the room, but the scent of heat does not entirely leave with them. Two other omegas that had been sitting with Reis are pink-cheeked and gold-eyed, fidgeting in their seats with the distraction of the uncomfortable. They’re nowhere near as bad as Reis yet, but -

“Go see the medics,” Will orders them, and closes his eyes with a sigh as the two scramble to collect their things and get out of the lecture hall. Counting twenty aching *thud*s of his heartbeat in his skull before opening his eyes again and returning to his desk to address the remainder of his class.

Alligator eyes study Will ravenously from all over the room, even redder than before. Worked up by the scent of in-heat omegas, the smell of their own responding arousal mixing with it horribly.

Will’s lip curls again, disgusted and unimpressed. The FBI Academy is supposed to be an institute for education, not a strip-club. “I’ll have the rest of this lecture - and your homework based upon it - available on the intranet today after lunch. *Class dismissed.*”

The students do not react well to being so abruptly dismissed.

The hallway outside of Will’s lecture hall has seen - and smelled - better days. There are no students in sight, but a team of three rather harassed-looking cleaners is hard at work when Hannibal arrives there around noon: two mopping up a large puddle of water and spatters of what is quite obviously blood from where it is attempting to brown on the linoleum, and the third industriously wiping down surfaces with scent-deadening cleaning supplies. The air smells predominantly like sweat, iron, and the mingled scents of many alphas near rut - violence and lust -, the tangled mess of a mixed dynamic crowd’s distress forming the turbulent baseline.

Another cleaner is hard at work inside Will’s classroom, wiping down the rows of desks as Will stares rather broodingly into space at his desk. Class dismissed. The air here smells

artificially neutral, edged by Will's ozone: clearly, the scent-deadening sprays have already done their work in the lecture hall.

Will startles when Hannibal sets a bag down beside him, his blue eyes wide as a startled prey animal's, limned in gold.

Hannibal's lips twitch at the sight - something he allows Will to glimpse for the momentary flicker of exasperation it earns him passing across Will's face. Tipping his head towards the cleaner in the room with them: "Should I ask, or is this something you'd prefer not to discuss right now?"

Will grimaces, removing his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose. "...The pheromones of too many oversexed alphas in close confines, plus FBI Academy stress, triggered early heats in - at least - three of my omega students. I sent them off to safety then dismissed the class, but adding heat scents on top of everything had already made things worse. The ensuing fight spilled out into the hallway." He sighs. "Technically, I think there were several fights, but they merged into one big brawl."

"I could smell the traces of mass rut as I arrived," Hannibal says, "or something close to it. And blood." He tilts his head, eyes narrowing, as Will tucks away his glasses. One low, dull note of iron hangs tantalisingly in the air. "You have blood on your tie."

Will looks down at himself and then, spying the large spot of blood on his blue-and-grey striped tie(-like *thing*), makes an audible *ugh.* "One of the betas who got involved got his nose broken."

"You assessed his injuries?"

"No, I dumped a bottle of water over the head of the alpha who slammed the beta's face into the floor, then scruffed the knothead when I had his attention. Probably got the blood on me then." At Hannibal's *look* at Will askance: "In my experience, if it works for dog fights, it works for alphas. Though a hose is more efficient."

If the fight were bad enough, many of the teachers at Hannibal's boarding school in Paris had merely waited until the teenage alphas exhausted themselves or victory had been declared, then stepped in with reprimands in the aftermath, brusque hands marching unruly schoolboys to the infirmary and/or detention. Hannibal had learnt young to avoid such physical brawls with his alpha counterparts - or to finish them quickly, before the teachers arrived. Tattling had been taboo, so the only way to get caught had been to get caught in the act.

"Have you broken up many fights between alphas near rut?"

"I used to be a *cop,* Hannibal," Will says with some exasperation, tugging at the knot of his tie to pull the fabric loose enough to unloop from his neck. More consideringly, he adds: "Think the technique mostly works because of my dynamic. Alphas who try it just seem to continue the fight."

"An omega scruffing them in a disapproving manner may remind them of their mothers doing the same to them as children."

Will grimaces again, balling up his tie and stuffing it in his pocket as he rises to his feet. “I was explicitly trying to *avoid* the Freudian analysis, so thank you for that, doctor.”

Hannibal hums, drawing out the note just long enough for Will to lift his eyes to Hannibal’s - with evident wariness. (*Distrustful thing.*) “And we haven’t even begun to discuss phallic imagery yet.”

Unimpressed, Will prods him in the chest. “Just embarking upon the topic makes you dickish enough to render elucidation moot.”

Hannibal huffs a laugh, obligingly stepping out of the way for Will to sweep up the last of his belongings still remaining on or by his desk. Papers mostly - crime scene reports and photographs. A few prints of different late mediaeval interpretations of the Wound Man - missing his mate, the Disease Woman, so often placed beside him through *mise-en-page*.

“It seems you continue to throw yourself into other people’s fights,” Hannibal murmurs, pushing one of the prints towards Will, forefinger light on the diagram’s battered head.

Will takes it with a grumbling sound in the back of his throat. “I’m alright, Hannibal.” One irritable hand raking back through his hair. “Aside from this *goddamned* headache.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrow as Will produces a bottle of aspirin from one of his many pockets, shaking out two pills into the palm of his hand. “How many of those have you had today?”

“Not enough,” Will gripes, and tosses back the pills dry. Since he had, apparently, decided to empty his bottle of water over a student’s head. “Maybe it’s the caffeine withdrawal.”

Hannibal says nothing, refusing to rise to such blatant, inflammatory, bait.

The cleaner wiping down the desks finishes with her work, packing away spray bottles and cloths in her trolley on the lecture hall’s central floor. A few more clatters, and the trolley’s wheels squeaking as they roll out of the room.

“...Sorry,” Will mutters, remorseful and averting his eyes.

Will has had a difficult day, and Hannibal can smell the sweat from his slowly rising temperature again. The fever thundering in his skull. Hannibal is, therefore, fully prepared to accept Will’s apology, soothe some of the shamefaced tension that has now hunched up Will’s spine - only the sound of footsteps interrupts them, a hurried little half-jog and the smell of an alpha’s concern.

The scent brushes at the back of Hannibal’s mind: a sea of grass whispering in the night wind, and stars reflected in the liquid black of kiss-blown, avaricious eyes. Smoke and sweetness on the tip of Hannibal’s tongue as he touches it thoughtfully to the roof of his mouth -

Ah. The alpha - one of the alphas - who had left the scent of FBI cafeteria food and their pathetic longing on the arm of Will’s jacket on *la Toussaint.* The smear of their touch a mark Hannibal had been sure to spend the rest of night and following morning rubbing away.

Warm earth, green moss, dried oak and spikenard. Distinct now, laced with a little sweat, worry, and the saccharine musk-notes of mingled sexual and romantic attraction. Alpha testosterone. The smell of a recently consumed - burnt - black coffee and a tuna salad made with poor quality fish.

Hannibal turns just as the alpha joins him at Will's desk.

Male. Unmated. Approximately a few years older than Hannibal - or wearing his age a little poorly, blond hair greyed noticeably at his temples and beginning to thin. Fit, healthy and tanned, but average in height, weight, appearance and style: utterly forgettable, had he not already caused offence.

Eyes only for Will, half leaning over the desk to the omega on the other side. "Will, I heard what happened. Are you alright?"

Will straightens his back, subtly placing a few more scant inches of air between himself and his would-be paramour. His gaze sliding beyond his visitor, to the still-open door of the lecture hall. "The Academy grapevine is still thriving then, I take it," he says dryly.

"Half a class brawling near-rut in the halls is something of an Academy-wide concern," says the alpha, only slightly abashed at being called-out for gossiping.

Too busy looking at the top two open buttons of Will's shirt, Hannibal realises with a stab of irritation, undone when Will had pulled off his tie and now showing a pretty notch of pale skin beneath.

"Half a class?" Hannibal pointedly inquires of Will, *sotto voce.* His fingers itching. Will had - deliberately, it seems - failed to convey just *how* large the brawl he had waded into had been.

Will refuses to look at Hannibal. "I'm fine. Thanks," he says to the alpha instead. Gesturing vaguely with one hand swept in Hannibal's direction: "Clive, may I introduce you to Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a psychiatric consultant for the bureau and-" pause - "a friend of mine."

Clive blinks at Hannibal like he'd required the introduction to even notice Hannibal had been standing there, too focused initially on the perceived prize to recognise that it is already far out of his reach - or the obvious pitfalls on his route. With the danger pointed out to him, he is now trying to calculate just how much of a stumbling block to his hopes Hannibal might be, his broad chest gently expanding as he tries to both posture and subtly scent out Hannibal's dynamic. *How dull.*

His blatant attempts to assess Hannibal's position in Will's life and the world slide off Hannibal's smooth façade like water off a duck's back, finding no purchase in the bland pleasantness of Hannibal's expression. *Friend* had made Hannibal a person of interest to Clive: someone he needs to impress, at the least, and a potential threat. Hannibal would stake a great deal of his fortune - the part of it that the American government is aware about, at least - on the likelihood that Will Graham has never introduced more than five people in his adult life as a *friend* to another person before.

“Hannibal,” Will continues, gesturing back to *Clive,* “Professor Clive Ericson, one of my colleagues here at the Academy. Clive specialises in gangs and gang behaviour.”

A description utterly lacking in emotional attachment. Hannibal allows Professor Ericson a brief nod in acknowledgement, pleased to at last have a name and a face to attach to the disagreeable smell that had dared to encroach itself upon his territory.

“You wouldn’t be the Dr. Hannibal Lecter who has written so extensively on social exclusion?” Ericson asks, his eyes - just - flickering with alpha red in response to his own disquiet.

“Are there many Hannibals in the psychiatric community?” Will asks - almost rhetorically, though he has turned just so to angle his body towards Hannibal. Voice laced with an invitation to join him in the joke. “Thought it was easier for you all to cross the Alps than each other’s career paths.”

“I’m afraid the topic has never arisen at the annual Hannibals International meeting,” Hannibal informs him with false gravitas, dividing two from one with the shared humour and uncaring of the rudeness to the third wheel in their company. “The elephant in the room no-one dares to discuss.”

Will ducks his head with a soft laugh and Hannibal, nonchalantly triumphant, turns to Ericson. “I am that Dr. Hannibal Lecter, yes.”

Ericson visibly makes the conscious decision to regard Hannibal and Will’s bantering in front of him as a sign of their friendship and comfort in his presence rather than a deliberate attempt - on at least *one* of their parts - to alienate him from their conversation. The gathering red seeps out of his irises, his shoulders relaxing as he extends one hand to Hannibal to shake.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, doctor. Read your name in print so often I almost feel like I’m meeting an old friend in person for the first time.” He continues, jovially ingratiating: “Your explorations of the consensual nature of stigmatisation have prompted some long-needed questions to be asked in my own field of studies. Shaken up the establishment a bit with a newer perspective.”

Hannibal allows himself a single slow blink as he briefly grasps Ericson’s hand - his only response to the alpha’s staggering lack of self-awareness. “Perhaps I should be more careful then, lest my studies in sociality have my behaviour deemed antisocial.”

“How *avant-garde*,” Will says, elegantly droll. His work bag now filled and slung over his shoulder, gait easy as he walks around his desk. On Hannibal’s side.

Hannibal picks up his own bag, taking the hint. “I’m afraid we have plans,” he tells Ericson politely, resisting - for now - the temptation to drop his free hand to the small of Will’s back beside him. Will radiates heat along his side regardless. “Perhaps another time?”

“Oh, I-” Ericson blinks, rocks back on his feet with obvious disappointment, and then readjusts. Not *entirely* without manners. “Of course, yes.”

Hannibal and Will take their leave whilst Ericson still appears to be dumbfounded, stepping into the balder light of the hallway with the same foot.

Since the air is now aggressively scentless the cleaners have moved on, but Hannibal still ducks his head to the height of Will walking beside him, murmuring, “I believe you’re aware that that man has feelings for you?”

It’s not truly a question, and Will sighs. “I suppose it’s getting hard not to notice. He won’t take the hint, but a blunt rejection would make me look bad. People like him.”

“You’re uninterested in his suit,” Hannibal clarifies, another petty flash of triumph flaring hot below his diaphragm when Will nods. “Perhaps a small demonstration to suggest you’re unavailable?”

Ericson has apparently recalled enough of his wits to remember that the only real exit from Will’s lecture hall is to leave the same way Will and Hannibal had, and Hannibal can hear his footsteps now behind them.

Will and Hannibal both fall to a stop.

“...He’s watching?” The way Will purses his lips brings the pretty pink of his Cupid’s bow into sharp relief, something terribly dubious in his expression when he looks up, when Hannibal yields to the temptation to touch him at last and lays one hand on the back of Will's neck.

Fingers immediately sift into the soft dark hair curling at Will’s nape, Will shivering as they curve, Hannibal’s nails scratching lightly at his scalp. Lifting his chin a little further. Leaning into it.

“...Kissing me in the middle of an Academy hallway is hardly keeping our dalliance just between *us,* Hannibal. Like we agreed.”

“There are far more ways to stake a claim than with a kiss, Will.”

Gently pushing someone out of a conversation by repeatedly failing to engage with their input, for one.

Hannibal leans in closer, makes a neat little circle of space in the hallway that is only them and their eyes on each other. The heat of Will’s brow warms Hannibal’s temples, the gold flecks of his eyes curling smug warmth in Hannibal’s belly. “I promise you plausible deniability.”

Will remains sceptical - but pliant. “*Suggestive* plausible deniability.”

Two unrelated adults - both renowned for their individual aloofness - standing so close to one another they share breaths is suggestive enough, but Will seems to have missed that detail for now.

Together, they must make a stunning tableau.

“Of course,” says Hannibal. Returning Will’s earlier call to mischief with a smile of his own - a tiny thing that only Will himself should be able to see, so close. “Surely it is only natural to offer comfort to one’s close friend after the other has been through such a terrible incident at his place of work?”

“Hannibal…” Will’s exasperated amusement is a warm little puff of breath against the corner of Hannibal’s mouth, Hannibal dipping his head to Will’s, an almost-kiss.

Hannibal wants to kiss him, wants to put his mouth all over Will and devour the omega whole, but settles for now in tilting his head just enough to rub his cheek languidly against Will’s instead. Slowly, a little circular nuzzle that spreads his own scent and the scent of his cologne into Will’s skin, smears the oils on Will’s skin thoroughly against his own jaw until they and their sweet scent are absorbed into his flesh.

Will had started his day too early - and too distressed - to remember to put his aftershave on before leaving his home, so the scent that Hannibal marks himself with is purely, entirely *Will.* Nothing of his would-be paramour, nothing of the idiot students in his class, can withstand a thorough scent-marking like this.

Head bowed, nose turned to the sweet curve of Will’s ear, Hannibal lets his eyes fall closed and simply *breathes.* Smoky pine and cardamom filling up his lungs, the sound of three heartbeats whooshing through the theatre of his skull - one, still developing, still so small. The shape and heat and *feel* of Will Graham, still leaning into this. Precious things.

Will’s fingers pluck a little unsurely at the front of Hannibal’s overcoat, at the strap of his own bag over his shoulder, but he lifts his chin to return Hannibal’s gesture. Participating, scent-marking Hannibal in return, a sweet little nuzzle that rubs their cheeks together, moves Hannibal’s hand in his hair into an open caress.

The tickle-scratch of Will’s stubble is almost a familiar thing to Hannibal now, the soft little purr that rumbles in Will’s throat when Hannibal’s mouth brushes across his jaw.

His eyes are blown when Hannibal pulls back from him, black limned in pure gold. Lips parted far too temptingly, all but begging to be kissed.

The hallway behind them is empty. (Professor Clive Ericson appears to have taken the hint.)

“Lunch?” Hannibal asks - and watches Will blink straight from desire into confusion, then embarrassment, and end up in a state of all three.

He steps back from Hannibal, and Hannibal allows him to go. “...I’d rather not face the gossiping hordes, and it’s a little cold outside right now. My office?”

Hannibal agrees, interested in seeing more of Will's private space, and then rather wishes he hadn't.

Will’s office is a small windowless box that holds nothing but a desk, three chairs, several file drawers, the framed print of brown-hued abstract blobs, and a particularly floppy potted

spider plant. The only thing visible that is clearly *not* FBI-issue is the pot the spider plant is sitting in, because said pot is covered in pictures of little cartoon dogs.

“I see your tastes have expanded to interior design,” Hannibal says, and Will snorts at him.

“I spend as little time in here as possible. It gets too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter. The only reason the plant isn’t dead is because it was a gift from Alana and she bet me 10 bucks I’d kill it within a year.”

“Are you a known killer of indoor plants?” Hannibal inquires, beginning to unpack the contents of his bag on the empty surface of Will’s desk.

(Though Will might not frequent his office terribly often it seems the Academy’s cleaners do: a discreet swipe for dust with the side of Hannibal’s hand before he lays down the first container confirms that the furniture is clean.)

“Only if they live here,” says Will, grin crooked. “Don’t worry, doctor; your fancy herb-wall is safe from me.”

Something of the - intended - true picnic atmosphere is lost eating indoors at a desk, but Hannibal still lays out a spread: bottled spring water, containers of fruit, and toasted baguettes smeared with lemon garlic mayonnaise and topped with sliced avocado, tomato and rashers of bacon. Small, sweet fig goat’s cheese pies made with basil follow, squares of carrot cake drizzled with cream cheese frosting, and hot chilli pepper chocolate truffles.

Will steals one of the truffles before sitting down, and Hannibal turns a blind eye as the omega sucks the inevitable dusting of cocoa powder from his fingertips.

“Some lighter fare than usual. You have had a very stressful morning; the last thing you need is for us to overtax your stomach as well.” Hannibal had spent some time in his kitchen that morning preparing this meal, aiming for something light but satisfying that wouldn’t trigger Will’s nausea too badly. The traditional aphrodisiacs and sweeter elements used in the dishes should soften Will’s attitude towards Hannibal, whilst still being packed full of all the vitamins Will should need to support their growing child at this stage of his pregnancy. “Have you taken any of the medication I gave you today?”

Will’s brow creases guiltily, and he begins patting down his pockets. *No,* he has not. “I’ve been busy.”

“Understandable,” Hannibal says neutrally, taking his own seat as Will continues to fail to find his antiemetics.

Will does, however, find the acupressure wristbands, as he had most likely never taken them out of his pocket after Hannibal had first given them to him. With another quick, sheepish glance at Hannibal, he pulls them on and starts fiddling them into place.

Hannibal pushes one of the sandwiches towards him: dinner before - more - dessert. “I’ve taken the liberty of contacting my neurologist friend on your behalf. He’ll be free to meet with you and run a few diagnostics until quite late tonight, if you’re amenable.”

“You’re right.” Will’s frown is quick and sharp after his smile, the sandwich ignored. The air tastes like gathering lightning, the mercury in the barometer plunging rapidly. “You *have* taken a liberty.”

Only practice allows Hannibal to hold back his sigh. He *had* hoped that they might have cleared the hurdle of Will’s immediate rejection in the kitchen earlier that morning. “Will, you agreed that you would consider it.”

“No, I agreed that we would *discuss* it. *Now.*”

“Are we not discussing it now?”

“No, *now* we’re discussing where the hell you get off arranging doctor’s appointments for me and sharing my medical information without my consent!”

Hannibal leans back from Will’s desk at the flash of the omega’s fangs, the hard slap of Will’s palm to the wooden surface between them. Ceding the ground in appeasement: this is Will’s territory, and the flushed red of warning is high in Will’s cheeks. “Will, I merely called my friend to ascertain if and when he and the diagnostic machines he has access to would be available for a consultation. I didn’t give him your name, or any of your other details. I promise you, all Dr. Sutcliffe knows is that I have a potentially ill friend I believe could benefit from his expertise.”

Will remains resistant to appeasement, the gold in his eyes cold and hard. “And the simple fact this Dr. Sutcliffe is a *neurologist* isn’t enough of a giveaway about what my problem might be?” A half-aborted, irritated little trill, Will raking back hair from his face again. “He’s not going to think I have something wrong with my *foot,* Hannibal!”

One can lead a horse to water, but one cannot make them drink. For all it would be in Will’s best interests, in their baby’s best interests, in *Hannibal’s* best interests to have Will feel indebted to him whilst being safely, securely, tucked away for treatment in hospital.

“Whether he thinks there is something wrong with your foot or not, he has no way to tie that back to you,” says Hannibal.

Will, wild stubborn thing he is, is gentled by touch. Too accustomed to being starved and starving himself of physical affection.

Hannibal reaches out to him as he had earlier that morning, one hand covering Will’s on the desk between the dishes of food. Passably entreating, “Will.”

Will snatches his hand back as though scalded, still glaring - and this time, Hannibal does sigh. He may need reinforcements for this war.

“Would you prefer it if I left?”

Will’s eyelids drop suspiciously, his gaze slitted. “What good would that do?”

“You could eat your lunch in peace,” Hannibal says, calculating - yet - another adjustment to his plans. Will needs the food more than Hannibal needs to win this particular argument at the

moment.

“Do I look anywhere near *peaceful* to you?” Will asks him, scathing. As haughtily beautiful as a young god in his disdain, the purity of it shining through his mortal corruption.

And then, just the slightest crack in that marble visage -

Will wavers, and the taste of his fear bleeds through. “...You really think there’s something wrong with my brain? Physically wrong?” His eyes search Hannibal’s, divining for truth.

Hannibal seizes on it, asking softly, “Do you believe that I would risk our friendship by consistently pushing this topic if I did not?”

Will pauses, and Hannibal watches the moment in him unfold where his needle unerringly finds north. “...I think you’d keep pushing any topic with anyone if it meant eventually getting your own way. You just adapt the timescale and your methodology to suit the situation. The person. If -” another pause, the pink slip of Will’s tongue wetting his lips, “if you care about them or their opinion or not.”

“A rather cold assessment, Professor Graham.”

“Incorrect?”

“No.” Hannibal leans back in his seat, keeping his limbs uncrossed and expression cordial. The image of openness. “I understood from quite a young age that the way I approached the world was different to those around me. A step removed.”

Everyone, ultimately, approaches the world alone, whether they realise that or not.

“You still feel,” says Will.

“I do,” Hannibal confirms, politely acknowledging - and then stepping around - the unspoken *psychopath* that lingers in the air.

Legally speaking, there is nothing wrong with being a psychopath - laws most often revolve around what one does or does not do, not what one is -, but having the label and/or diagnosis attached to oneself tends to invite awkward questions and social disapproval.

The term is far too reductive for intelligent clinical use, anyway.

“Thus,” Hannibal says, “why I am asking you to go and see a neurologist, even though I know you object.”

“Because my symptoms concern you,” Will says. Clarifying?

Because Will’s symptoms concern Hannibal, because Hannibal - even without further diagnostic exams - is almost perfectly sure that Will’s illness is going to get a lot worse, and that endangers Will and their developing baby.

God, in all his casual, wanton malice, shall not have either.

“As a doctor, and as your friend,” Hannibal says. Will is looking for truth, so Hannibal gives him it freely, another open hand offered across the space between them. “I would rather be potentially wrong and inconvenience you than be right and forced to live with the regret of not insisting on this.”

Will hesitates. “You don’t seem like a man who lives with many regrets.”

“With every choice lies the possibility of regret. However, if I choose to do or not do something, it’s usually for a good reason.”

“I feel like I stack up regrets every day.”

“A life without regret would be no life at all.” Hannibal stretches out his fingers, holding Will’s eyes firmly until Will drops them to look at Hannibal’s offered hand instead. Wavering again, his heart swayed by an emotional imploring. “But I do not wish to regret you, Will.”

A beat.

Will’s shoulders slump, another one of his defences crumbling against Hannibal’s persistence. His fingers still hesitant against Hannibal’s when he reaches back to him - but undeniably *there.* Victory. “I have office hours this afternoon and then a lecture that doesn’t let out until 6. Can your friend see me after then?”

Will had expected John Hopkins, or one of its associated clinics. Will had *prepared* himself to face John Hopkins or one of its associated clinics.

Will had not, in fact, asked Hannibal if his friend worked at John Hopkins or one of its associated clinics, and so finds himself staring at the entrance of the building that houses the Noble Hills Health Care Centre instead. At the sleek, shining sign in cool metals, blue and white. The burbling fountains full of crystal clear water. Marble floors. Tinkling piano music being played quietly over an unseen sound system.

This is a *rich* rich person’s hospital. Private. Exclusive. *Screechingly* expensive.

Will gives Hannibal the stink-eye. It’s tragically ineffective, as Will is still trying to choke down the last - too large - mouthful of fancy katsu something-or-other (pork chop) sandwich that Hannibal had thrust upon him when Will had arrived at Hannibal’s house after work (because apparently it would not have been *healthy* for Will to skip or delay dinner). And Hannibal is apparently, irritatingly, immune to malevolent psychic intent, a peacock that swallows poison to make his plumage shine more brightly.

Will had left his car at Hannibal's house and allowed Hannibal to drive them both to Noble Hills in his Bentley, so Will can't even drive away now in a vaguely betrayed huff. There's a drumming in his temples again anyway, slowly drowning out the world. He's not happy.

The receptionist - more an impression of a flawlessly made-up face and perfectly straight white teeth than a person - gives them the directions to Dr. Sutcliffe's office several floors up, and Will spends the elevator ride up there fidgeting with the cuffs of his blazer.

The whiskey-brown warmth of Hannibal's eyes, reflected in the elevator's mirrored walls, is amused. "It's a medical appointment, Will, not a firing squad."

Will's lips thin, and he deliberately turns his head away from Hannibal's reflection to frown at the floor. "If they'd used this place as a runway during the Terror, the nobles probably would've happily sashayed their way down it to the guillotine at the end."

Hannibal only hums in reply, but Will can hear the laughter in it. *Ass.*

Onwards and upwards: another reception desk on the new floor, and a waiting area stocked with that particularly uncomfortable breed of leather sofa which acts like flypaper against sweaty bare skin. Will is fully clothed and the leather *still* squeaks when he sits down on it.

Hannibal reaches out after a few minutes of sitting in silence to still the bouncing of Will's leg with one hand on Will's thigh. Waiting until he has Will's attention before handing Will a pen and notebook from his briefcase.

"I'd like you to draw a clock face. Numbered. Large hand indicating the hour, small hand the minute."

Will frowns at him. "Why?"

"A grounding exercise. Nothing more. Instead of worrying about things that may never happen in the future, I want you to remember a present moment. The now. Often as you can, think of where you are and when."

"This feels like you're tying mittens to my coat sleeves," Will says dubiously.

"Indulge me," says Hannibal, so Will takes the notebook.

Moleskin, pleasant against the points and whorls of Will's fingerprints. Crisp blank white pages inside.

Will flips to the first blank page then, with a glance at his watch, draws a quick clock with the current time.

Circle. Numbers.

"Think of the time," Hannibal says. "Think of where you are. Think of who you are."

Hands at 8 and between 4 and 5.

“It’s 8.23pm,” Will says. Wearily. “I’m in the Noble Hills Health Care Centre in Baltimore, Maryland. My name is Will Graham.”

“Just a simple reminder,” Hannibal explains, far too grandly, when Will hands him back his things. Hannibal nods down at the drawing: “A handle to reality for you to hold onto when things may feel overwhelming.”

The notebook closes as gently as it had opened, Will’s ‘handle’ pressed between its pages.

“Telling the *time* isn’t my problem,” Will grumbles. The sofa squeaks when he shifts his weight again.

“Thank you for humouring me,” Hannibal says, and smiles when he momentarily catches Will’s eye.

Far too seriously, warmly sincere over something so trivial.

A matching - traitorous - flutter of warmth takes momentary flight behind Will’s bellybutton, and Will firmly squashes the feeling back down again by resolutely frowning at a nearby pot of calla lilies until Hannibal’s neurologist friend comes to collect them both.

Thankfully, they don’t have to wait too long.

Dr. Donald Sutcliffe is an unmated omega man in his mid-40s, obviously intelligent but a touch, Will rapidly surmises, self-absorbed. His office, lined with his framed awards and diplomas, is as obviously upscale as the rest of the hospital that Will has seen so far, and is heavy with his natural scent after a long day of work: something like clary sage and sandalwood, with a syrupy kind of fruitiness to it that deepens when Sutcliffe shakes Hannibal’s hand.

The scent is not unpleasant but it *is* a little thick, and Will finds himself sinking down into a chair even before Sutcliffe has finished closing his office door behind them all, mildly dizzy. Again.

“You’re in very good hands,” Sutcliffe says jovially, touching his own hand familiarly to Hannibal’s back as he crosses the room to take a seat at his desk, opposite Will. “Dr. Lecter here is one of the sanest men I know.”

“I would agree,” Hannibal says with a total lack of shame, smiling first at Sutcliffe and then Will, removing his coat. This is going to be a long appointment. “Dr. Sutcliffe and I were residents together at Hopkins.”

“Another life ago.” Sutcliffe’s answering smile at Hannibal creases the corners of his eyes, and thickens his scent again. (Will may have to request someone open a window.) “Back when *you* weren’t afraid to get your hands a little dirty.”

Hannibal nods genially and takes a seat, his long legs angled towards Will - and warm gaze not far behind them. “I was always drawn to how the mind works. I found it much more dynamic than how the brain works.”

“The projected image is more interesting than the projector until, of course, the projector breaks down.” Sutcliffe takes the hint, and turns his attention fully to Will. All business now, the warmth of his voice fading for a keener light in his eyes as he dons a pair of glasses. “So, Will. Dr. Lecter mentioned you were concerned about a sudden spate of sleepwalking?”

After their conversation at lunch, Will had made a point of expressly giving Hannibal his permission to discuss some of his details/symptoms with Sutcliffe when arranging this appointment, if only to speed up the whole process by not having the neurologist walk into the meeting blind.

“Yes,” Will says simply. The scent in the room feels like a weight sitting on his chest, something physical his ribs have to push back against with every intaken breath.

“Headaches, fever, nausea that won’t go away?” Sutcliffe waits for Will’s answering nod before pulling out a sheaf of papers from a drawer. *Forms.* Begins filling them in. “Which came first? In earnest?”

“The headaches. Uh - two months ago, I think.”

“About the time Will went back into the field,” Hannibal adds, “which is when I met him.”

Sutcliffe *hm*s, his fingers drumming the surface of his desk in thought. No rings or tan lines on his fingers: he’s unmarried. “Could be stress. Could be something else. Can I ask when your last heat was?”

“Just over two months ago,” Will says.

Scribble. “No suppressants?”

“They give me migraines.”

“Inconvenient.” One omega’s nod to the problems of another. *Scribble scribble.* “Any family history of brain disease?”

Not much family history. Will closes his eyes for a moment, takes a steadying breath through his nose. (Isn’t clary sage supposed to be a *soothing* scent?) “Not that I’m aware of.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Sutcliffe says, disconcertingly blasé about a patient’s medical background. Will opens his eyes again just to squint at him, feeling his mouth twisting into a frown. “How about accidents, head traumas? Even if you’ve just had a slip and fall?”

“I’ve had one or two violent encounters. Basic blunt trauma.”

Sutcliffe just keeps scribbling away. Very officious. “Ever checked for concussion?”

“No.”

“You will be today.” *Scribble* - and then the *click* of the pen as Sutcliffe looks up at Will seriously. They’ve reached the biggest box on the form. “Have you any other symptoms that you can think of? Even if it’s something small? Just something that feels a little *off*?”

Will -

Will stalls. His chest heavy and his tongue thick, struggling for a few awful moments to try and find the words to describe the - accumulating - periods of disorientation he has had lately. Moments when time has seemed to move too quickly around him, spilling through his fingers like water and leaving him with no real memory of how he had moved from the *then* to the *now*. Unable to express the vivid *un*reality of his dreams lately, the way the border between sleep and waking has become- become *fluid,* so that it feels like he can straddle both.

“If I may?” Hannibal asks politely.

Handed a life jacket in a storm at sea, Will glances over at him with some relief. And then frowns again, as Hannibal is holding his moleskin notebook once more. His thumb marking the page where Will had not long ago drawn his clock.

“Not a grounding exercise then, I take it.”

Hannibal doesn’t do Will the disservice of pretending to be contrite, not when Will would see through the act immediately. “It can be, but that was not its primary purpose.” To Sutcliffe: “I had Will draw a clock shortly before we walked into this room.”

“I see.” Sutcliffe stretches out his hand for the notebook - and fails to wholly hide his reaction when he sees Will’s drawing. His eyes widen, just enough, eyebrows raised - and a cold prickle of dismay slithers down Will’s spine and up again.

It’s never a good sign when doctors are *interested* in your symptoms.

Sutcliffe grabs a fresh sheet of paper from his desk, clicking his irritating little pen again and drawing a short straight line, about a few inches long, across the sheet. Both pen and paper are then pushed over to Will. “Would you mark the centre of the line for me, please? It doesn’t have to be perfect, but a close approximation would be best.”

One step short of asking Will to recite his ABCs.

Will has to remind himself that this doctor is doing him a huge favour this evening - *both* doctors in the room with him are, actually -, and bites down on his tongue to stop himself from coming out with something rude. Leans forward to take the pen, the paper, and, with a short mental assessment of the length of the line he can see in front of him, bisects the ink with a quick sharp slash of his own. Hands his work back to Sutcliffe.

Sutcliffe’s eyebrows do not come down.

“It’s encephalitis,” says Hannibal.

Will had been less than happy to be informed that his clock drawing and line-marking had shown obvious signs of left-sided hemispatial neglect affecting his visual perception, physically unable to see the problems with his own work. Blind to the elongated ellipsis of his clock face, rather than a circle, with all its numbers and hands drawn clustered on the right. Unable to see that the 'midpoint' he had marked on Donald's line had been far to the right of the line's true midpoint.

Will's exasperation had faded into dismay as he had realised Donald was being serious, and then the soft burning ozone of his scent had been tainted bitter-sour with fear when he had glanced over at Hannibal, reading the confirmation of everything Donald had been saying in Hannibal's face.

He'd signed his consent for an MRI with no further complaints almost immediately after that.

Through the glass of the control/observation room he and Donald are standing in, Hannibal watches as one of the MRI technicians hands Will earplugs before Will takes a seat on the tray of the machine. Clearly uncomfortable.

The pale blue of Will's hospital gown, and the low lighting of the exam room, washes all the colour out of Will's skin, a drowned man floating in dim waters. He lies down. Stiffly. Tense as the MRI machinery begins to loudly whir, but his thumb nowhere near the panic button he had been given. Prepared to see the scan through.

"That's your pre-diagnosis?" Donald asks.

Donald had not been too difficult to lean on for a favour such as this. With Hannibal's wealth and connections, Hannibal would have had no trouble in getting Will seen just as quickly at John Hopkins as he has here at Noble Hills, but Alana had reminded him of Sutcliffe only the other day. Of the affair Hannibal had been embroiled in at the time Miriam Lass had disappeared: Donald, already an old ex-'flame' from Hannibal's residency days, revisited when Donald had gotten the job at Noble Hills.

If Hannibal must trust Will's treatment to another, Donald has capable enough hands. Dr. Donald Sutcliffe is one of the finest neurologists in the DMV area - because if he *hadn't* had moments of brilliance, Hannibal would have never taken the arrogantly vain omega to bed in the first place, never mind trusting something as precious as Will Graham to his official expertise now.

After their long acquaintanceship, Hannibal knows exactly how to exploit Donald's vanity to best suit himself, leaning on the respect and affection he knows Donald still feels for him. On the *attraction* Donald obviously still feels for him, as, today, the neurologist has foregone splashing himself with the vanilla-and-leather cologne that Hannibal had always known him to wear. Donald's natural scent of wild figs, clary and sandalwood had been left unaltered to fill the confines of his office: a calling card to the more amorous days between himself and Hannibal, the bedroom jokes Hannibal had once murmured to Donald's flushed skin about wild figs and honey. *Unsubtle.*

Donald Sutcliffe is easily handled, and, through him, so is Will.

“Yes,” says Hannibal.

Donald hums, watching as the tray Will is lying on is raised up and into the MRI machine. “Based on?”

Left-sided spatial neglect highly suggests a contralateral anomaly in the right cerebral hemisphere. And - “I could smell it,” says Hannibal.

“So your sense of smell has gone from calling out the exact notes of a nurse’s perfume to diagnosing autoimmune disease?”

Hannibal’s hyperosmia had *always* been that extreme, though he has refined his diagnoses over the years with research on and exposure to different olfactory notes and situations. “He started sleepwalking and I noticed a very specific scent.”

Donald blinks, considering that. Curious: “And what exactly does encephalitis smell like?”

Like the court of the Prince of Sleep.

“It has heat. A fevered sweetness.”

Hannibal watches as that thought creases Donald’s brow, settling in amongst the physical twists and folds of his brain and pricking at wherever the shreds of his social conscience lie. “...If you suspected, why didn’t you say something?”

Were it not for the pregnancy, Hannibal would not have. Will’s fever could have burnt a little longer without too much risk of damage to the omega, his mind left vulnerable to suggestion, to *change,* as the barriers inside of Will crumbled into the dark ocean Hannibal has glimpsed roaring behind his beautiful eyes. Social inhibitions irrelevant in a mind with no restrictions, Will’s dark innermost desires brought to the fore and fixed there as he made himself anew.

A few mishaps, a little stumbling, here and there would have been an agreeable price for Will to remain in the potential of metamorphosis, a trusting novice under Hannibal’s hands to be guided into enlightened self-actualisation.

As it is, Will’s condition is now too *delicate* for him to be allowed to trip and stumble on a moonlit road. Encephalitis can be a difficult malady to treat with no other complications. Add the unpredictable hormones of a pregnant omega, a beautiful mind as wholly unique as Will’s, and the priceless cargo in his womb, and the entire situation may very quickly become dangerously unmanageable.

Were he to grow too sick, Will could miscarry. Were the encephalitis to grow too strong a hold, Will’s mind and/or body could burn itself out, leaving Hannibal with nothing but a pretty facsimile of a lover as a reminder of his calculations gone awry. Will could, ultimately, die, and leave Hannibal with nothing but another shuttered door in his Mind Palace.

“Had to be sure,” Hannibal explains, and Donald’s concerns recede immediately. “Will holds something of a grudge against those he suspects of psychoanalysing him, and he is not my

patient. Many of his symptoms could also be a result of stress from his work, but they have gradually worsened. Asking him to draw a clock was an impulse decision."

Another hum from Donald. "The headaches and fever are common prodromal symptoms. Spatial neglect is more severe. Any behavioural changes?"

"Will has grown increasingly anxious lately, become more aggressive. This morning, he was unable to exactly recount how he managed to drive an hour from his home in Virginia to mine in Baltimore. His dreams, as he has described them to me, have become more vivid recently - potentially verging on hallucinatory as his mind crosses the permeable line between sleep and consciousness."

"All tell-tale signs." The first scans start coming up on the screens in front of them, and Donald bows forward to start clicking through them. More humorously, he asks, "Don't suppose you can smell if he's got a tumour?"

"I don't believe he does," Hannibal says, and waits for a moment whilst Donald switches on the nearby microphone. Instructing Will via the earplugs to turn his head to the left. The microphone switched off again - "Or at least, not a newly developed one."

"Could be an ovarian teratoma," Donald posits. Something Will would have had since birth. "If he has encephalitis, we'd see both on a whole-body PET."

A scan relying on Will's abdomen being directly exposed to radiation.

"You may have to rely on other diagnostic methods," Hannibal says coolly. "Will Graham is pregnant."

Donald pauses. Eyes Hannibal, and then lets his gaze flicker out of the observation room, to Will in the great round magnet through the glass. "Does *he* know that?"

Hannibal allows his silence to speak for itself.

Donald whistles lowly. Encephalitis is a fascinating disorder in itself, and rare enough there are still a great many facts left to discover about it, a great many studies to be made.

Hannibal can count on one hand the amount of formal studies conducted about the effects of encephalitis, particularly of the autoimmune kind, during pregnancy, because he can only count on *two* hands the amount of pregnant patients who have ever been successfully diagnosed with the disorder and treated during their pregnancies. There is exceptionally little data about the treatment of encephalitis in pregnant patients, and were Will's encephalitis one of the rarer forms, as Hannibal believes it to be… *well.*

There is a great potential for groundbreaking discoveries to be made. Knowledge gained. Acclaim certain. Too much of a temptation for any doctor to ignore.

"You weren't kidding when you said you had an interesting case for me," Donald says, and the fangs in his grin gleam with the reflected lights of his computer screens.

Through the microphone, Will is directed to turn his head to the right. More scanning, then upright again.

The imaging from Will's scan fills the screens around Hannibal and Donald, static 'three-slice' scans on minor monitors whilst the main screen displays an animated scan of Will's brain. A glimpse from all angles of the inner workings of Will's skull.

"The right side of his brain is almost completely inflamed," Donald says. Even now, after so long knowing Hannibal and what Hannibal's nose can detect, he sounds astonished. "It's Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis. Without immediate treatment, the symptoms are only going to get worse."

"I know," Hannibal says mildly, magnanimously refraining from any further expression of *I told you so.*

Donald huffs a laugh anyway, cheerfully accepting the unspoken reproof. "What do you smell on *me?"*

Hannibal considers him for a moment. Eyes crinkling as he smiles - "Opportunity."

Will is glad when the MRI is over and done with and the tray he's lying on smoothly slides back down into place outside of the machine. Even with earplugs in, the machinery had been *loud,* a disconcerting knocking, banging, all around Will that felt like it had beaten itself into his bones. A coffin bearing down on him from all sides, death clamorous.

The exam room floor is cold underfoot, and shivers race up Will's legs and spine. No technician is waiting.

Hannibal opens the room's door before Will can, a plush dressing-gown over one arm. "Will?" His expression is grave. "It's probably best if you don't bother getting dressed."

Will takes the dressing-gown. The soft, luxurious dressing-gown, with *NHHC* embroidered on its chest pocket. So much easier to focus on than the much creepier part immediately afterwards where Will is ushered into a room that is covered in monitors showing multiple images of his own brain.

The mind spins. A 3-D image of Will's brain spins as well, silently, terribly, rotating on the screen in front of Dr. Sutcliffe as he gives Will the bad news.

"Encephalitis?" Will asks. *The fuck?*

"Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis," says Sutcliffe. A particular series of words that Will is now going to forever associate with the taste-scent of clary sage in his mouth. "It's a type of

brain inflammation caused by autoantibodies in your system attacking particular neurological receptors in your brain. We'll have to do a lumbar puncture to be perfectly sure though. Run some other tests to completely rule out other encephalopathies."

Wonderful. (*What the* fuck?)

"The right hemisphere of your brain shows clear signs of swelling, Will," Hannibal says, much more gently than his former colleague. His hand light but consoling on the small of Will's back, mindful of Will's shock. Bewilderment.

Will turns to him, leaning into the touch. "So my fever, the compromised vision and the sleepwalking…?"

"Almost certainly the result of the inflammation, yes."

"How is it treated?" Will asks, letting his eyes flick pleadingly between both doctors in the room with him. His questions are for both of them. "How did I even get it in the *first* place?"

"Approximately half of all cases concerning this kind of encephalitis are associated with tumours," Sutcliffe explains, and Will isn't sure if he should be grateful for the neurologist's blunt presentation of facts or not. "In particular, teratomas of the ovaries - so we'll be doing some scans."

"...You think I have a tumour?" Will asks faintly. A tumour not even in his head. Hannibal pulls out a nearby rolling chair and helps him sit down.

"Finding a tumour would actually be the positive outcome in this scenario," says Sutcliffe. "A relatively quick surgery would remove the cause of the autoantibodies and allow you to be on your way with a much shorter treatment plan."

"And if you *don't* find a tumour?"

"Surgery or no surgery, first-line treatment is immunotherapy." Will closes his eyes, but Sutcliffe keeps on going. "Steroids to suppress your immune system, intravenous immunoglobulin, and/or plasmapheresis to physically remove the autoantibodies."

Hannibal touches Will's shoulder from behind, still gentle. Still bearing bad news, but cushioning his words with the faintest soothing waft of the cologne he must have applied on his wrist. "You're looking at a prolonged stay in hospital, Will. It's incredibly difficult to administer this kind of treatment remotely."

"How prolonged?" Will asks quietly.

Sutcliffe again: "In studies, approximately half of all patients have shown signs of improval after four weeks of first-line immunotherapy."

"Four *weeks?"* Will explodes, jolting under Hannibal's hand, outraged at the proposition. "I can't stay in the hospital for four weeks!" He has a job. He lives alone and has *seven dogs.*

“It may be a great deal longer than that,” Hannibal says, and Will turns, first, disbelieving eyes, and then, when he realises Hannibal *really means it,* a thunderous scowl, on him. “Will, if left untreated, this could kill you. Once it escalates - and it will escalate -, you are likely to start hallucinating wildly and suffering extreme psychotic episodes. You will develop problems with your speech, your memory and your motor functions. Further problems with your sight. Seizures are almost inevitable. Should the disease become acute, you may lose all feeling on one side of your body. Several of your organs may shut down, and you would require intensive care to stabilise your breathing, heart rate and blood pressure. Catatonia would follow. And coma.”

Each statement a strike against Will’s resilience.

“Outcomes are significantly improved with an early diagnosis and treatment,” Sutcliffe adds, and *Christ,* Will has to close his eyes again. Block out the endless rotating images of his own broken brain and take refuge in the dark. His head is pounding again.

“Right.” This is serious then. Really serious. “Right. Do I have time to go home and feed my dogs?”

“It’d be best to admit you immediately,” says Sutcliffe. Because *of course.*

“Right,” Will says. “Okay.”

“Perhaps ten minutes?” Hannibal suggests from somewhere in the darkness behind Will’s eyes, behind and overhead. Strong, familiar fingers squeeze Will’s shoulder again: an anchor in the stormy night.

“That’ll give me time to get the nurses to find you a room, arrange for the blood samples and LP,” says Sutcliffe. Papers rustle, a chair squeaks, and then footsteps walk away.

The scent of clary sage and syrupy fruit fades with them, and Will sits in the silence of a room filled with quietly humming machines. A minute passes. Two.

Elbows on his chair arms, Will puts his head in his hands. “Hannibal.” Pleading.

Hannibal squeezes his shoulder again, thumb running back and forth over the curve of Will’s upper arm. “Can one of your neighbours check in on your dogs tonight?”

“I- yes, probably, but I don’t -” Will swallows. Gets a grip on himself. Lifts his head.

Hannibal meets his gaze calmly, still a sure thing when everything else is shifting around Will. Looking at him, Will almost feels like he can get through this.

“My phone is with my clothes.”

“Then I will get it for you.” One thing at a time. Will reaches up to his shoulder and squeezes Hannibal’s hand back before letting him go. “Call your neighbour, Will. Ask them if they can feed the dogs and let them out for a run, just for tonight.”

Hannibal brings Will his phone. Will calls his neighbour, who agrees to look after the dogs for the night. A round-faced beta orderly comes to show Will to a private ward room, though Will declines the wheelchair he is offered to get there. Ever the gentleman, Hannibal carries Will's belongings.

Six floors up in the elevator. A corridor lined in windows, showing night over Baltimore. All the city lights are swimming in Will's eyes.

(No stags.)

Will's room looks more like a luxury hotel suite than a hospital ward. Main room. Private bathroom. Closet. The walls are all deep forest green and dark panelled woods, tasteful paintings hung here and there. The bed is, of course, a high-end electric hospital bed whose segments can be raised and lowered at will by remote, but the other furniture leans towards dark fancy woods and soft upholstery.

There's even a curtained *nesting area* in one corner, with a base that can be locked into and out of place should someone inside the nest need to be pulled out in case of emergency.

A cheerful omega nurse - Hillary, as she introduces herself, brisk but friendly - comes to help Will fill in his intake form and then take some samples of his blood. Sutcliffe wants to get some of his tests done quickly before hooking Will up to steroidals overnight, the lumbar puncture among them.

"I should probably ask for a transfer to John Hopkins," Will says after Hillary has taken his blood and gone. "After the spinal tap."

Busy arranging the few clothes and belongings that Will had had on him for his appointment in Will's bedside drawers, Hannibal pauses. "You don't like it here?"

"I like it here as much as any hospital I'm going to be stuck in for at least a month," Will says, sighing down at his phone as he attempts to compose a brief email to the FBI Academy's HR department about the medical shitstorm he's found himself in. Squinting at the tiny text is hurting his head. *Everything* is hurting his head, because his brain is borked. "*Not at all.* But my insurance company is more likely to sign off on Hopkins than- Christ, whatever *this* place is. It looks like a hotel instead of a hospital." Will tugs at the front of the fluffy robe currently protecting his modesty. "I've got a *monogrammed dressing-gown.*"

Hannibal leaves Will's drawers alone, approaching the small dining table in the room which Will has taken a seat at. "The prolonged nature of your stay is all the more reason for you to remain here rather than ask for a transfer. John Hopkins is a wonderful institution, but a much busier one. You'd be kept in close confines with a great many more people there, and in much less comfort."

Oh, for the ease of the casually wealthy who can - literally - afford to take such things into consideration when arranging for their healthcare. Will isn't poor by any means and he has insurance through the FBI, but that *still* doesn't leave him at liberty to park himself in a luxurious hotel-hospital for over a month.

“I’d like to have money left in my bank account when I get *out* of hospital as well,” Will points out.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hannibal says. Dismissive.

Will frowns. “Hannibal.” Looking up from his phone at the particular determined expression on the beta’s face, its intent clear - “Hannibal, you are *not* paying my hospital bills.”

Something rather mulish shifts into the angle of Hannibal’s jaw. “Am I not the one who brought you here?”

“You were,” Will tells him evenly, because he’d rather not get into an argument with the other man at the moment. Will’s head *aches;* they’ve argued enough today, and Hannibal has done Will favour after favour already simply by insisting on and arranging the appointment with Sutcliffe. “So you’ve done *more* than enough for me already. Jesus, you’ve probably saved my *life.*”

A swollen brain. Who has a few headaches, sleepwalks a bit, and thinks they might have a swollen *brain?* Things could have gotten a lot worse for Will if Hannibal hadn’t’ve stepped in.

“Reward me then,” says Hannibal, casually, confidently, somehow both rude *and* irritatingly selfless at the same time, “by allowing me to save your sanity as well.” Will sets his phone down with a careless *clack,* mouth already open to protest - “You’ve already observed that I have the wealth to spare, Will. Let me put it to good use.”

“I can’t just -”

“Yes,” Hannibal says firmly. Every inch of him saying he is willing to argue over this issue as well. “You can.”

Sutcliffe and an entourage of nurses and equipment enter before Will can find the words to answer him, so Will settles for shooting Hannibal a pointed glare from under his lashes. They *will* be discussing Will’s medical bills again, just as soon as Will has the time and energy to do so.

Hannibal, the *asshole,* blithely pretends he doesn’t see it, and takes himself off to the corner of Will’s room to flick through a stack of provided magazines whilst Will is prepared for his lumbar puncture under local anaesthetic.

Sutcliffe has Will lying on the bed for the procedure, on his left side with his chin tucked down and knees tucked up to his chest. Naked, apart from a slip of fabric over his waist, Will finds the position distinctly foetal, closing his eyes against the fingers roving up and down his spine, listening to his own heartbeat as it whooshes through his ears.

The sharp alcohol smell of antiseptic wipes. The sting of the anaesthetic needle as it is injected under Will’s skin, tracing out the intended path of the spinal needle that will follow it.

“There we go,” Sutcliffe murmurs behind him.

Will shifts his arm just enough to bring his wrist up against his nose, breathing in against his scent gland there. Holding pine and smoke and spice in his lungs as long as he can, fortification against syrupy clary sage.

At least Sutcliffe appears to be good at his job. The actual spinal tap doesn’t take very long (though the sound of the gentle *tap*- pause- *tap* of the spinal needle being pushed through, first, Will’s lumbar cistern, and then his dura mater will no doubt haunt his nightmares in the worst way for years to come), Sutcliffe withdrawing triumphantly with several small vials of Will’s cerebrospinal fluid for analysis.

“I’ll get these to the lab ASAP,” he assures *Hannibal,* and Sutcliffe is incredibly lucky that Will is still too tired, still feeling a bit too odd with the area around his *spine* anaesthetised, to tell Sutcliffe exactly where he should shove those vials instead of taking them to the lab.

Sutcliffe leaves again, the nurses and equipment with him. Giving Will a little chance to rest, before he needs to get hooked up to a drip.

Moments drift by. Will raises his chin just enough so that he can stare at the great big black square of night that is the window beside his bed. No stars, not with the room’s lights still switched on.

Hannibal is a reflected blur of colour at the corner of Will’s eyes.

“All your friends are dicks,” Will informs him, and smiles tiredly to himself when the rumble of Hannibal’s laughter reaches him on the bed.

Hillary returns before Will has quite summoned up the fortitude required to sit upright on his bed, another female doctor with her. Another omega, by the smell of her, with a kind smile and tired eyes as she comes around the bed so that Will can see her without having to move.

“Good evening, Mstr. Graham. My name is Dr. Morgan-Moore; I’m one of the specialists here. I just need a few minutes of your time, if that’s alright?”

“Sure.” Will would have preferred to meet her with a bit more covering him than a bedsheet, but it’s not like he’s up to much. Just lying there, waiting to have *more* needles stuck into him.

“Perhaps alone?” Morgan-Moore suggests to the room. To Will alone, more apologetically: “I’m afraid I have some delicate questions to ask you.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says immediately, setting down the magazines and rising to his feet. He comes over to the bed before he leaves the ward, one hand lightly touching Will’s ankle through the bedsheet as Will cranes his neck to look at him. “I’ll see about getting us something to eat.”

“I could eat,” Will tells him softly, and waits until Hannibal has (smiled) left before turning back to Morgan-Moore. “How can I help you?”

The nurse at the desk on Will's floor is very helpful about arranging a meal for Will, even though it is now well past 11 o' clock at night. Tomato soup and buttered toast. Hot chocolate and a blueberry muffin. Simple, healthy, warming food, to ward off the chill intravenous fluids will introduce into Will's blood. At Noble Hills, it is nearly all cooked fresh from scratch each day using high-end ingredients.

Hannibal would much prefer to prepare all of Will's meals himself, but if Will *must* consume the work of others at times, Hannibal at least has the assurance that Noble Hills will not feed Will something subpar.

Hillary the nurse trots out of Will's ward, very obviously carrying a sample cup filled with urine and more vials of Will's blood.

Fifteen minutes later, Hillary the nurse trots back in again, samples replaced by a small folder under one of her arms.

Amazing, how one can chart the absolute transformation of another's life by such *banal* things.

Will's tray of food arrives, still steaming, with an extra hot chocolate and blueberry muffin for Hannibal. Hannibal thanks the nurse at the desk for the thought, and politely sips at the hot chocolate until Dr. Morgan-Moore and Hillary exit Will's room once more.

Will is dressed in his boxer shorts and sitting upright on his hospital bed when Hannibal returns to him, his shoulders slumped and back to the door.

Silently, Hannibal studies his reflection in the window beside the bed for a few thoughtful moments, the pale blur of Will's form a ghost against the night. His head bowed, like he's awaiting another needle in his spine. The day's revelations sinking in.

Will has had a lot to deal with today, all at once. Thus, Hannibal tempers his tone to something gentle when he speaks again, wary of startling his poor injured lamb.

"All done?"

Lost in the labyrinth of his own thoughts, Will startles anyway. His eyes wide and wet like a wounded forest creature, his body trembling all over. "I -"

Hannibal frowns, affecting concern. "What is it, Will?" Setting down the tray of food, Hannibal busies himself with gathering up Will's dressing-gown again, immediately draping it around Will's shoulders. "What did the specialist say?"

“I-” Will swallows, the bob of his throat a nervous, jerking thing that draws the predator’s eye. Hannibal wants to set his teeth to it. “She- she’s an obstetrician.”

Donald had seen to it that the correct tests had been done then. *Good.*

“I’d assumed they would send you for further exams before getting a gynaecologist involved,” Hannibal says, as though pondering aloud.

“Some of my bloodwork was a little strange, so she - uh. She needed to clarify a few things.”

Each rapid fluttering blink of Will’s beautiful ink-black eyelashes severs time and teardrops, each damp-eyed millisecond cleaved from the next.

“Hannibal, I’m pregnant.”

“...I see,” says Hannibal, and deliberately lets his tone turn cool. Playing well the friend and the lover who feels kept in the dark. “Your last heat? Just over two months ago, I believe you said.”

Will shakes his head quickly, some of his hair sticking to the clammier skin on his forehead, throat. “I spent my last heat alone.” Desperate now for Hannibal to believe him, reaching out to grab Hannibal’s wrist before Hannibal can pull away from him. “Hannibal, you’re the only person I’ve slept with since June. I don’t- I don’t know if a condom broke or we were just careless, but.”

But. Will takes Hannibal’s hand, and very deliberately places it on his naked abdomen.

Muscles flutter and jump under Hannibal’s palm, the slightly jerky rise-and-fall of Will’s breathing. It’s still too soon for Will to be showing his pregnancy, but the gesture is not wasted on Hannibal.

This is yours.

“Apparently you’re still very fertile in the weeks following your heat,” Hannibal says carefully. Leaving his hand on Will’s skin, letting Will relax by increments in the knowledge Hannibal isn’t pulling away from him and this further complication. “They’re sure?”

Will nods. “Dr. Morgan-Moore has arranged an ultrasound for me first thing tomorrow, to see how far along I- it is. Will you come?”

The apocalypse itself will not stop Hannibal from being there.

He leans forward to place a kiss against the troubled furrow digging into Will’s brow, Will’s semi-permanent fever still hot against his lips. “I won’t leave you alone in this, Will.” His thumb rubbing tenderly against the smooth skin of Will’s belly - “Any of this.”

Chapter End Notes

Consommé: (consumed/ingested - more archaically, consummated/fulfilled) a clear broth made from reduced meat or vegetable stock, served hot as a soup or chilled as a jelly.

'Fun' fact: though we mostly see Will hearing static, dripping water and injured animals in the show as his encephalitis progresses, the most common form of auditory hallucination is hearing indistinct, whispering human voices.

The medical information in this chapter is as accurate as I could make it (and pretty much took two whole weeks of research and refinement time…), which may be 'not very' as I am not a medical student or practitioner of *any* kind. If there are any extremely jarring errors for those of you who know better, please let me know!

Hannibal *really did* leave his victim's tongue bookmarking James in a bible. Because Hannibal is an asshole. An incredibly funny asshole. Here's the crime scene photograph prop! (Warnings for canon gore.) And here's the bible chapter I quoted, if you're interested.

Food, Glorious (Aphrodisiac) Food:
Fig goat's cheese pie with basil
Bacon, tomato and avocado sandwiches
Hot chilli pepper truffles
Katsu sando

(If you're binge-reading this fic, now is a good point to take a break.)

quenelle

Chapter Summary

> Will and Hannibal see the fruit of their labours for the first time, and there are some serious conversations to be had about the future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will Graham is four, and his mother is feverishly cleaning the house from top to bottom.

Arielle Graham had always used those days when her husband-mate had been at work all day to thoroughly clean their home - *"Scrub as I might,"* she had once whispered dramatically to her son, thumbing away the yoghurt Will had had smeared across his chubby toddler's cheeks, *"when your daddy's about all the mess just seems to get stuck under his feet!"* - but that day she had had a 'grown-up' appointment in the afternoon. Squeezing a full day's cleaning into the summer morning instead.

The increasingly loud clattering of the mop's handle off the cabinetry in the kitchen had chased Will from that room as soon as he had finished his breakfast cereal, seeking refuge in the living room with his library book about frogs. Crawling into his secret space under the table, where the sun still warmed his legs but the pale blue tablecloth hid him from view.

Arielle's cleaning had followed him: the duster being whisked about their shelves, Arielle's upset, indistinct muttering under her breath. Rumblings that were still better spoken out loud than held like the frightened, flighty tension in Arielle's calves - which are all that Will can see of his mother from his hiding spot, her bare toes gripping the carpet beneath them like the world is moving too fast for her to keep her balance. The treacherous snag of her skirt on the sharper edges of their furniture is just another omen rolling in like a storm.

Will Graham is four, and - though he does not know this yet - it is three days before his mother will walk out of his and his father's life forever. Arielle Graham is cleaning the little house that Will had spent his first formative years in with his parents - the little house that Will barely remembers except that the living room carpet had been soft and the tablecloth on the dining table had been one shade darker than blue sky blue -, and Arielle is palpably tense, sad and afraid.

All the tension and the sadness and the fear swallows Will up whole under the table, and big fat tears start wobbling down his cheeks. Plopping down onto the open book on his lap, splashing all the pictures of the frogs and spoiling the paper.

The indignity of having his book damaged is what tips Will's tears over into open sobbing, and, by the time his mother hauls him out from under the table, Will is bawling. The noise,

the dramatic crying and the flailing of limbs with it, is unlike him, but the grief is not his either. At four, Will is too young to comprehend the complexity of everything his mother is feeling, and that confusion is only another addition to the wave after wave of emotion that is swamping him now.

Arielle is guilty now, too, as she tries to soothe him on the floor. Hushing and shushing, rocking Will to and fro in the circle of her arms and lap until Will eventually calms again, his hot wet face buried in the curls of her hair. (Had she really smelled like eating spice cookies in a summer garden, or has Will mixed up the memory of her scent with that little house and himself?)

There is 'apology' ice-cream after that. With raspberry syrup from the store: a coveted luxury. Will and his bowl are plopped outside on the back porch, out of the way.

There are chickadees singing in the woods out back. *Fee-bee. Fee-bee.* Will's spoon clinks in his bowl with the same bright sound.

Will is four, in the garden now with ice-cream on his face and grass stains on his knees, and then he is no longer four, standing in the woods with the blur of a half-forgotten home behind him. Bare toes in the soft springy undergrowth where he drops his shiny spoon for the corvids to collect. *Fee-bee, fee-bee, chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee* in the green leafy branches overhead.

There's a copse in the woods where the sun is still shining, dappled light a golden blanket to the dark bed dug deep into the earth. A large, neat rectangle cut out of the ground and filled with bloom after bloom of sweet lavender, the soil still dark - freshly-turned - but drying in the heat of the day.

A little pocket of ocean, of safety, of sky.

The flowers explode in a sweet-smelling shower of green and purple when Will topples backwards into their bed, his floral mattress sinking inevitably under his weight and taking him down below the lip of the earth.

Above him in the woods, the tree branches wave. The blue sky a blanket, covering Will like the tablecloth.

"Do you see it now?" a voice asks above him, and Will cranes his neck back, behind him -

His own face looks back. A mirror image of Will Graham, crowned in lavender, the edges of his loose white shirt open for the breeze to playfully tug at.

"I can see it," Will tells himself, and smiles back at the benevolent smile from above.

Will is still smiling when he turns over, face into his lavender bed -

And lurches forward, tripping over his own ankles and stagger-falling into the warm body beside him, the hand keeping him upright with a firm grip on his arm.

"Whoa," says Will's anchor, bringing around their other arm until Will gets his feet under himself again. "Careful there."

The summer woods are gone. The ice-cream, the lavender, the chickadees -

"...Where…?" Will slurs, lifting his head from where it hangs like an albatross from his shoulders.

The corridor around him is dim. There are smooth polished tiles underfoot and the air is tinged with the scent of *expensive* hospital-grade disinfectant. That bite of the ethanol underneath the skin conditioner.

A hospital. *The* hospital. *Right.*

"Are you back with us, Mstr. Graham?" Will's nurse, Hillary, smiles when she sees his eyes focus upon her green ones, giving him a quick, comforting little squeeze to his arm. Under the sweat-soaked fabric of his hospital gown. "You went for a little wander in your sleep. Got halfway down the corridor!"

"...S'rry," Will manages, shivering, reaching up with one fist to rub at his eyes. Sleepwalking. *Again.*

"Nothing to apologise for," says Hillary, so resolutely unflappable she - well, she makes a good nurse. Something in her manner reminds Will of Beverly, and that familiarity does a lot to calm the immediate edges of his distress. "You can leave your room whenever you like, you know - but let's try and keep it during your waking hours, hm?"

By the looks of it, Hillary had led Will most of the way back to his room already. A few more weary metres trudged sees Will back inside, given a new gown to change into, tucked into bed and with a new catheter inserted into the back of his bruised hand. He'd pulled the last one out, apparently, and there's still a third of tonight's dose of corticosteroids to get through.

Hillary frowns to herself as the fluid starts moving through the tube and into Will's body again. *Drip, drip, drip.* "I'll have to make a note on your chart about tonight's escapades. Your doctors will probably want to discuss sleep medication with you."

"Can't wait," says Will tiredly.

Hillary gives Will the particular kind of unimpressed look that says she's dealt with people dishing out a finer class of shit than what Will and his scrambled brain are currently capable of, scribbling down her observations on the chart at the foot of Will's bed. "I'll be clocking off shortly for the night. Is there anything I can get you before I go?"

There is nothing Will wants at the moment except to be left alone, so he says goodnight. Hillary leaves - and it seems all hope of sleep might as well have gone with her, Will left sitting upright, wide awake in his bed.

The electric-yellow lights of Baltimore flash and crawl across the black landscape of Will's windows like tiny flittering golden bugs: fireflies on their way out, dying guts smeared under

some inquisitive child's prodding fingers. The world continues on out there, beyond the walls of Noble Hills. Inside -

Will drifts off. He must, because when he becomes aware of himself again there's another nurse in the room with him, removing his empty IV bag, and Will had never noticed them come in. The quality of light has minutely changed, and *pain* is holding his stiff neck and throbbing head in its vicious claws. (He should've laid down…)

The new nurse is called Tancred: omega, male, dirty blond, young - probably barely out of nursing school. Under the sanitiser and scent-deadening products, he smells very faintly like lemon meringue pie.

Will grimaces at him until Tancred finishes taking his blood pressure and gets him something for his headache.

"Is the entire medical team here omega?" Will asks, sipping luxury bottled water like it'll do anything about getting rid of the taste of the pills from his mouth.

"Your nursing team should mostly be," says Tancred helpfully, scribbling Will's vitals on his chart. "Hospital policy for omega patients, where possible. Prioritised when the patient's condition may make them a risk for." The pen stops on the chart's paper, and Tancred looks up. Aware of his tactless misstep. "*Uh.* Erratic behaviour."

Will's lips twitch, the dark streak of humour in him plucked by *schadenfreude*. He can't resist picking at this boy. "Have you had many delusional patients get offended at you for referring to them as delusional?"

"I've been told my bedside manner could use some improvement," Tancred tells him diplomatically, and smiles self-deprecatingly when Will snorts into his water. "You should get some rest, Mstr. Graham."

Tancred leaves, but sleep still does not come for Will. Even lying down, the day's events bang against the inner walls of Will's skull in an endless circling parade. It's Mardi Gras and all the beads are being used to throttle Will, rattling and clattering and spilling out of his hands like his *brain* apparently is as well. Burning him up from the inside out, and, with him, his-

Well.

How strange it is that so *much* can physically change within a human body without the mind and soul piloting the meat-and-bone suit becoming aware. How *terrifying.*

One major revelation about the betrayal of one's own body should be the maximum allowed per day, and yet Will had been hit by two intimate natural disasters in a row. *Complications* complicating one another.

Will has encephalitis, and there is a non-zero chance that the disorder may kill or cripple him in some way.

Will is, simultaneously and just as unintentionally, pregnant, and his and Hannibal Lecter's approximately eight week-old - if his calculations are correct - baby is growing in his womb. Embryo. Foetus. *Unborn offspring.*

The encephalitis is likely playing havoc with Will's pregnancy. The pregnancy is undoubtedly fucking up the presentation of some of the symptoms of Will's encephalitis.

According to Dr. Morgan-Moore, there are not enough medical studies to reliably say what either condition will mean for the *other* condition, though there is nothing to say Will definitely *will not* be able to recover from his encephalitis and carry his pregnancy to term - should he choose to do so. Will has options.

Will has options he really should have discussed with Hannibal instead of clinging to Hannibal pathetically the evening before, desperate, in that moment, for the comfort a paddle could provide against the currents threatening to sweep him away.

Successful pregnancies end with a baby. What is *Will* supposed to do with a baby? What is Will supposed to do if he successfully carries a pregnancy to term and has a baby, but the encephalitis damages him severely and irreparably? Will can't just- just *dump* a baby on Hannibal and expect Hannibal to deal with it; Hannibal had been as surprised by this whole mess as much as Will had.

The thought of a *baby* growing beneath the span of Will's hand across his own abdomen is absurd. Will can't feel anything there - yet -; only his own organs push back against his palm.

"Did you get any sleep?" Tancred asks when he shows up with the morning light, utterly unsympathetic when Will turns his face into his pillow and groans at him.

Will's vitals are taken regardless of his suffering, and he is handed one dry piece of wholemeal toast to choke down before breakfast to help reduce his morning sickness. Painkillers. Water.

Will is getting very tired of water.

Hannibal arrives around an hour later as breakfast - more toast, baked beans, bacon, orange juice and a kiwi fruit - is being cleared away. Will hadn't expected it of him until later, but apparently Hannibal has *already* been to Wolf Trap to see to Will's dogs and bring Will some things from home and that's. That's at least a *two hour journey there and back again,* never mind the time it took Hannibal to feed the dogs, let them outside, and pack up Will's stuff.

It's barely 8.30. Hannibal has to have been awake since around *5*.

Will's eyes are burning embarrassingly. He - rather rudely, he's aware - snatches the bag of his things from Hannibal's hands with a gruff *thanks* and flees into his bathroom, hoping against hope that he might be lucky enough as he's getting washed to drown in the hospital shower.

No such luck. Will cleans himself - with his own soap - and brushes his teeth - with his own toothpaste and toothbrush -, before yanking on one of the t-shirts Hannibal had packed for

him along with a pair of flannel pyjama pants over a clean pair of boxer shorts. Dog-chewed slippers. *No more hospital gown.*

When Will leaves the bathroom again, bag clutched like a defensive shield against his chest, he almost feels human again.

Hannibal is flipping through Will's medical chart. He doesn't look up when Will enters the room. "You experienced another bout of somnambulism last night."

"Should you be reading that?" Will asks him, dropping the bag on his bed. It *thunks*; Hannibal seems to have raided half of Wolf Trap for its contents.

"Should I?" Hannibal asks, head tilted. Utterly shameless.

Will closes his eyes for a beat, contemplating whether the principle of the matter is something he really gives a shit about in this context - and reaches his answer swiftly, because honestly? He does not. He's too tired, and there's no point if it's Hannibal. "You know everything else. Just translate the medical-ese for me."

"There is nothing you shouldn't already know or feel, along with the notes for your course of steroids," Hannibal says. *Fwip*s back to the top sheet of the chart. "Sleepwalking."

Phrased like a question. Or an accusation.

Will shrugs. "Apparently my swollen brain decided to take the maxim to follow my dreams literally."

"The stag again?"

"No. Nothing in particular."

Hannibal looks terribly thoughtful at that, but he puts the medical chart back and Will takes the opportunity to unpack the rest of what Hannibal has brought him. Clothes, mostly. The blankets from Will's bed and sofa, no doubt intended for a nest away from home. Other mundane but intimate necessaries. Books: Will's copy of *The Pickwick Papers,* Frost's poetry and other poetry books, and some other novels that don't belong to Will but hardly look like they've just been picked, fresh, off the shelf of a bookstore either.

Will lifts one of the latter into Hannibal's line of sight inquiringly.

"I thought you may appreciate something to read," says the doctor. (What *else* does one do with books?) "Just a few things from both our libraries, but if there is anything particular you would like me to bring you…"

"Thank you." It will be interesting to read what Hannibal thinks may interest Will. "Can't quite recall when I last had the time to crack open a book just for the pleasure of it."

"Then I am certain many pleasures await you. A book is a garden, an orchard, a storehouse, a party, a company by the way, a counsellor, a multitude of counsellors." Hannibal pauses as

Will sets his stack of reading material down on the bedside cabinet with a delicate *thump.* "Which have counselled you the most?"

"My *vade mecum?"*

"Or enchiridion, if you'd prefer. 'A little thing in the hand'," Hannibal translates - with a very studied kind of idleness. (Another language for his list: classical Greek.) "Archaically also used as another term for a dagger."

"Words of wisdom can cut as much as knives do. More, perhaps." Will considers the question put to him, absently refolding his spare clothes to tuck them away into the drawers in his provided room. (He has a lot of drawers. What on earth do the people who run this hospital think a patient is going to put in them?) "I can't say I've ever had any one constant guide through life." Written or otherwise. "Guess a lot of people would say the Bible, huh?"

A non-answer. Maybe. Hannibal only hums noncommittally, and silence falls between them for a few minutes.

Will continues to unpack, simply tossing the blankets Hannibal had brought him from home into the nesting space behind the curtains without caring for how they land. (The thought of nesting here - *here,* with everything that incorporates - is a disquieting one.)

The tell-tale tic at the corner of Hannibal's eye *does* twitch at that. "Do you believe in God, Will?"

Eh. "What I believe is closer to science fiction than anything in the Bible," Will says, occupied in upturning Hannibal's bag to get at the pair of balled-up socks that *always* seems to evade initial capture at the corners of packed luggage.

"Both can turn a good metaphor."

True enough. The socks bounce off the bed and straight onto the floor.

"You're not religious," Will notes frankly. Waiting as Hannibal politely scoops up the runaway socks - near his feet - before extending an open hand to the beta.

The more time he and Hannibal have spent together, the more of Hannibal's overly-perfect socially-approved veneer has been gently, willingly, stripped away. Friendship akin to the most tender kind of flaying. Will isn't trying to cut deep, but occasionally the knife slips and blood spills in gouts onto the floor.

"Closer to spiritual, but that doesn't quite fit you either, does it?"

"I was baptised into God's Grace," Hannibal says, "if that is your concern. Though I do not live my life subservient to it."

From anyone else, that statement would be arrogance. And/or *obnoxious.* But it's Hannibal.

"...I don't think they have a box for that religious affiliation on the forms," Will says, allowing Hannibal to catch the flash of his grin as his errant socks are restored to him.

“Agnostic usually suffices,” Hannibal informs him archly - but all the golden sparks in his rich maroon eyes, when he looks at Will, are dancing.

All the cutesy scenes of ‘expectant mama’s first ultrasound!’ in Hollywood films and TV dramas absolutely fail to mention just how much the expectant *mama* in question needs to piss whilst the special effects are filling the screen with soft gold and rose-tinted effects. Will, already somewhat strained from having a uterus the size - and weight - of a solid tennis ball pushed up against his bladder, had been less than pleased when he had first been informed that he should not go to the toilet before his ultrasound in the morning. By the time morning has arrived, his ultrasound is imminent, and a night-and-breakfast’s worth of liquid has accumulated in his overburdened bladder, the only thing Will is disposed to view with any degree of dewy-eyed mawkishness is the nearest W.C.

“Sound waves travel better through liquid,” Hannibal explains with all the easy patience of a man who does *not* currently have to direct his thoughts away from the thought of flushing toilets, running taps and liquid in general in a determined effort to mentally gird his loins. “So a full bladder improves the quality of an ultrasound. As a pregnancy progresses, a full bladder often becomes less essential as the uterus and its contents have become much larger. During early pregnancy, however…”

“Horton only hears a Who when he’s desperate for a piss, I *get* it.” Will pulls away from Hannibal irritably when the medical personnel on the other side of the ultrasound room finally finish fiddling around with their equipment and/or paperwork, the technologist approaching where Will is seated on the edge of the room’s bed.

A rather familiar style of cloth folded up in their hands.

Smiling - “Would you like to change into a gown, Mstr. Graham?”

Will would not. Will frowns. “How would that work? I thought -” his hand drops to his abdomen, pressing there quizzically - “the transducer goes here, right? All I need to do is pull up my shirt, pull down my pants a little.” Everybody (and most importantly, *Will*) is comfortable, and all of Will’s assets are covered up.

“Ah.” The technologist’s smile falters a little, his - for the technologist is an omega male - eyes softening with a wincing sympathy.

Will does not *like* wincing sympathy. Wincing sympathy is foreboding. “*What.*”

“I’m afraid today’s ultrasound will be transrectal, Mstr. Graham. This early in your pregnancy the foetus should be sitting quite deeply in your pelvis, with your uterus and fallopian tubes closer to your birth canal than your abdomen. And sound waves don’t pass

through bone." Tacked on the end, as though the added logic will make Will *feel* any better: "We also want to take a few more up-close pictures of your reproductive system while we're up there, and this will be the easiest way to do that."

Tumour-hunting.

Will - grudgingly - takes the hospital gown, and trudges off behind the nearest privacy screen to change. "My life was *normal* yesterday," he grumbles to Hannibal on the other side, tossing the beta his t-shirt to hold as he begins the awkward task of tying all the hospital gown's laces behind his back. (He'll be *damned* if he asks anyone for help with that.)

"It really wasn't, Will," Hannibal says, so mildly it's patronising, so Will whips off his pyjama bottoms as well to throw them - with extreme prejudice - in Hannibal's direction after the t-shirt.

"Maybe it wasn't, but did the universe *really* have to hand me two sticks of dynamite at once and tell me to shove them up my ass?"

"Just one thing up your ass today, darling," says Hannibal, so Will sticks his head around the privacy screen to scowl at him. If Hannibal is laughing, Will is going to hurt him.

"If your eyes drop lower than my hemline at *any* point of this ordeal, I *will* find a way to brutally murder you with the first thing I can grab to hand."

Hannibal had caught the pyjamas. Hannibal, smiling rather contentedly to himself like the god of domesticity has personally descended from the heavens to bestow upon him their blessing, is *folding* them. "I will be a true paragon of virtue, Will. Much as I love watching your feats of ingenuity, I must confess they are not the performance I am most looking forward to this morning."

Annoyed just as much by Hannibal's helpfulness as Hannibal's wit, Will snatches his clothes back and leaves them - with his slippers and underwear - on a chair behind the privacy screen.

The sonographer who will actually be shoving a fancy wand up Will's ass is a rather sweet-faced older omega male nurse. As Will lays back on the raised bed again, he introduces himself as Dominic - which is just *another* new name, in a very short space of time, to rattle around permanently in Will's fevered brain.

Will tries to focus on the two silvery mating scars visible above the collar of Dominic's uniform rather than the sight of the sonographer lubing up a be-condoméd transducer. Drawing his knees up as bid, legs parted, and trying *extremely* hard to ignore the expectant silence in the room that is borne of four people just waiting for Will to get a medical wand shoved up his ass.

Hannibal - surprisingly - helps, sitting in a chair at Will's side and folding Will's hand closest to him between both of his own. His thumb running soothingly back and forth over the slight swell of Will's scent gland. "You'd be surprised at the sheer range of items I was called upon to remove from the rectal passages of patients in my days as a surgeon."

Will's head *thump*s back hard onto the bed behind him, and he turns his incredulous eyes on Hannibal.

"Cucumbers were quite a popular choice," Hannibal blithely continues, completely ignoring Will's nails digging pointedly into the back of his hand, "but the top 10 list of rectal foreign bodies I was called upon to remove, outside of broken sexual aids, also included shampoo bottles, bottles of alcohol, carved root vegetables, beaded necklaces and barbie dolls."

"We had a gentleman in here not too long back who'd shoved three baseballs up there," Dominic says, casual as he pleases. (This is what Will gets for actually introducing Hannibal as 'the father' for this ultrasound rather than just 'the support'.) "It was worse than the one time my eldest shoved his favourite Batman lego figure up his nose. I don't envy his surgeon."

"The worst I had of the kind on my table was a young artist who had poured Plaster of Paris up her rectum," Hannibal says, simply squeezing back on Will's grip on his hand at Will's muttered *oh my* God. "She wanted a mould of her colon, but only succeeded in glueing her sphincter - and the rest of her lower passage - shut."

"This is supposed to be a touching *moment,*" Will says - perhaps a little bit louder than necessary - when it looks like Dominic is about to continue the disturbingly focused surgical conversation.

The technologist clicking away on the computer beside them barely manages to mask his laugh with a cough, smile hid against his raised arm.

Hannibal lowers his face to Will's shoulder - where Will can *feel* the nuisance grinning against his arm. "My apologies, Will. It seemed as though you would appreciate a distraction."

"Some distraction," Will mutters - but he is, slightly embarrassingly, somewhat more relaxed as Dominic gently breaches him with the transducer.

The probe is cold and hard and utterly unwelcome, but at least it is not terribly *big*.

"Almost there," Dominic tells Will reassuringly, glancing between Will's face, the probe between Will's legs, and the screen the technologist has carefully angled towards him. "We'll just -" He smiles. *"Ah."* The transducer shifts angle in Will slightly, and Will grimaces at the *twinge* it sends through his straining bladder. "It looks like you've just got the one little resident in there, Mstr. Graham, sitting exactly where they should be."

The technologist beside the nurse nods, one hand lifted to touch the headphone Will hadn't even noticed the man put in his ear.

Dominic smiles even more brightly. "Would you like to hear their heartbeat?"

Sweat prickles at Will's neck, and he can feel himself growing damp and clammy in the crooks of his elbows, in the bend at the backs of his knees. He nods, vaguely aware of Hannibal's eerie stillness on his other side, and the technologist flips a switch.

An airy, steady, and fast-paced *whooshing* immediately fills the room, and everything apart from that grows quiet.

It echoes, in the abruptly empty cavity of Will's skull, the sound of rushing blood. A red bubbling brook, rising behind his prickling eyes.

The crescent edge of Hannibal's thumbnail scratches lightly over Will's wrist. "180bpm," Hannibal says after an infinity of moments, but has to clear his throat from its obvious hoarseness before continuing, to Dominic, "or thereabouts?"

"176," says the technologist, and Dominic nods at Hannibal, impressed.

"You have a good ear." The nurse turns his attention back to Will, informing him, "That's about average for this point of your pregnancy, which is a very good sign with your other health concerns. According to what you told Dr. Morgan-Moore, we're looking at you being at almost 8 weeks - which matches up nicely with the size of the foetus. Would you like to see?"

On a stiff neck, Will nods again, and Dominic's screen is turned towards him and Hannibal.

With no problems - so far - suspected of Will's pregnancy, today's scan is only a 2D one. That's still more than enough to see the blown-up image of a tiny foetus on the screen: a small, pale blob of growing cells that looks more like a lost baby sea creature from the aphotic zone than anything resembling a human.

The bulge of something like a head, with a squished-up protrusion that looks more like a muzzle than a nose and/or mouth. The almost equally 'large' (in comparison) bulge of a chest: the foetus' beating heart. The buds of arms and legs. A *tail.*

"...It looks like an alien tadpole," Will says absurdly, and feels the warm huff of Hannibal's laughter against his temple a moment before the beta lays a kiss there. The tip of his nose dragging along Will's hairline.

"The little tadpole's tail should already be getting smaller. Their little webbed fingers, on the very literal other hand, are just beginning to grow."

"Just so," says Dominic, and touches a finger on his free hand to the screen. Pointing out one of the visible bumpy spots on the head-bulge. "Their eyes have already formed, though they're still covered by a layer of skin at this point. They're clearly still working on the nose, but you can see the upper jaw and roof of the mouth coming together. Inside, a developing tongue."

"Sounds like a lot of work," says Will. His head is still full of the little rushing brook.

Dominic seems to understand Will's emotions, no matter the inanities actually coming out of Will's mouth. The nurse had mentioned a child, hadn't he? With the lego? Dominic must given hundreds of ultrasounds to pregnant people, and he'd once sat in the place Will is sitting now.

“They’re a good size,” says the nurse with another glance at his own screen. “About...115mm from head to tail. Estimated due date should be early July.”

A summer child. Will nods again tightly. He doesn’t quite dare look at Hannibal.

The ultrasound - unfortunately - does not end there. Dominic has to continue shifting around his probe to get a better look at Will’s ovaries and the upper wall of his uterus, and the gentle pressure against Will’s bladder has him instinctively clenching down on the transducer up his ass. The lube around it *squelches.*

“I’m not seeing anything out of the ordinary, Mstr. Graham,” Dominic says, which is *something* of a relief. (A great big something of a relief. Will’s shoulders slump with the stress taken off his back.) “If you have an ovarian teratoma, I’d expect to see at least the tip of the iceberg here: echogenic lines of some kind, and/or a mass or masses signifying hair or calcified materials such as teeth or bone fragments.”

Hannibal’s thumb passes down the warm throb of the pulse in Will’s wrist once more, and Will remembers to inhale again. Hannibal can’t see anything on the screen either, so Will is probably free from worrying about tumours on top of… everything else. “There’s nothing?”

Dominic purses his lips for a moment. “Nothing that strikes me as cause for alarm. We’ll be passing along the pictures from today to Dr. Morgan-Moore and the rest of your team, so they can re-confirm that for you. Advise you on the next steps. But everything in your pelvic area looks perfectly healthy to me, its little resident included.”

On cue, the technologist flips a switch again, and the sound of the foetus’ heartbeat cuts off.

The transducer squelches out of Will with even less dignity than when it went in. Will grimaces once more, and takes a handful of the immediately offered paper towels to wipe off the sliminess of the lube smeared across his asscrack and between his thighs.

He *needs* to go to the toilet.

“Would you both like pictures?” the technologist asks Will and Hannibal, everyone politely avoiding looking up the hiked-up hemline of Will’s hospital gown.

“I would,” Hannibal says graciously, august even to the soundtrack of a slimy condom and several lube-streaked paper towels being dumped in the trash.

“Can you print them whilst I change?” asks Will - and has already disappeared behind the privacy screen before the technologist can reply.

Pictures folded in their pockets, it is back to Will's assigned ward, where Will disappears into his bathroom. For all his complaints during the ultrasound, the omega had waited until he had the privacy of his own toilet to empty his bladder rather than using one of the more public restrooms along the way.

The delay gives Hannibal some hope; Will has started to recognise the small suite of rooms given to him at Noble Hills as *his* territory already, and has become more comfortable there as a result. Reducing stress on both mother and foetus, and increasing the likelihood that Will may remain in the hospital rather than trying to organise a transfer.

The toilet in the private bathroom flushes. Will emerges a few moments later, damp-handed and smelling of soap. Trying not to rub at the itch of the catheter still embedded in the back of one hand. "Will you be staying to hear what my doctors have to say this afternoon?"

The implication there being that Hannibal is now perfectly welcome to hear all of Will's private medical information. *Interesting.*

"Unfortunately," Hannibal says truthfully, "I cannot. I have some appointments with my own patients that cannot be rescheduled. Holidays often can be a fraught time for many, and I find my services are in the highest demand around those periods."

"Oh," says Will, his scent and expression doing a poor job of masking his disappointment as he wanders rather aimlessly over to the sofa. Fingers rubbing idly over its smooth leather back. "Of course."

"I could bring you a late dinner this evening," Hannibal offers, "and we could discuss your prognosis then."

But Will is already shaking his head. "I can't ask you to keep coming and going all hours of day and night. You've got a busy life and practice. It's *Thanksgiving* tomorrow. Don't you have some fancy dinner party or soirée to prepare for?"

"I declined all the invitations sent to me this year, if you must know. I'd been planning to invite you over for a quiet lunch." That had been one of the plans that Hannibal had been considering, at any rate. If Will had declined his appointment with Sutcliffe long enough for the holiday to wash over them in its neighbourly waft of dry turkey and overbaked pumpkin pie. "And Abigail. She seemed so disappointed to have slept through Halloween."

Will looks stricken, eyes as wide as blue saucers. "I- I'd actually made other plans this year." With *whom?* "One of the BAU lab team invited me over to hers for a Thanksgivukkah lunch, since she'd be alone otherwise."

"And all our plans, gone awry," Hannibal says neutrally, piqued at the thought of being *upstaged* - even theoretically - by no-one more important than one of Will's *work colleagues*.

Will nods and looks away again, lifting his hand from the back of the couch to rub at his arms. "I'm going to text her and see if she wants to visit me here instead."

"Then I will prepare enough for three tomorrow."

“Hannibal,” Will protests, “that’s not necessary. They feed me here, and you’re already taking care of my dogs.”

Luckily, the pack is already acquainted with Hannibal after his little *sleepover* at the beginning of the month - though Winston has not warmed up to Hannibal in the weeks since. He alone, of all seven mutts, had been displeased to see Hannibal in the early hours of that morning, circling his food bowl twice, suspiciously, as though Hannibal might have slipped in poison beside the food Will had left, pre-made, for them in the fridge.

“I find my time spent in the kitchen to be cathartic,” Hannibal says with perfect honesty. “A relief valve for any stress that may have built up during the day.”

Will grimaces to himself, dear thing, the guilt heavy on his shoulders. “I’m giving you enough stress.”

Hannibal would reach out and rub away some of the tension held in his shoulders, his spine, were he certain Will would not shrug away his touch at the moment. “You appear to be carrying most of it yourself.”

“No relief valve here for me,” says Will. “No stream to fish in, and I’d just carry all my issues out with me into the water if there was.”

“‘For within him Hell/ He brings and round about him, nor from Hell/ One step no more than from himself can fly/ By change of place.'” Will’s brooding certainly tends towards the Miltonesque, all the tempestuousness of the poet’s fallen Lightbringer in the flash of his eyes, the tumbling tamelessness of his curls.

Though perhaps Will would prefer to frame himself as the righteous Michael instead, triumphant over his foe.

“Hell,” Will says, in hollow echo of Hannibal’s quote. His hand - with the catheter still embedded in the back of it - slips from his arm and spreads wide and quivering over his abdomen. Womb.

Hell. Ah.

“Would you resent me if I kept this?” Will asks. Swallows, and amends: “Them?”

“No,” Hannibal murmurs at once. His prowling hunger refuses to be caged up behind his teeth. “Much the opposite.”

Will looks at him - wondering, doubtful, overwhelmed. Full of so many emotions at once he’s trembling with them. “You want this baby?”

More than anything Hannibal can recall wanting for a long, *long* time. So long ago that he had almost forgotten what it was to *want* this much, a yawning void opening up in the centre of him that demands to be filled with this and *only* this.

He approaches Will - carefully. Fingertips light on the omega’s tremorous elbow, his eyes anchored on Will’s fast enough the universe cannot shake him out of place. “If you do not

wish to carry this child for yourself, I would ask you to carry them for me."

Better that Will yield to this by a gentle request than by force. Hannibal has several contingency plans in place should Will try and deny him this, but it would be better for their friendship, for Will and their baby, for Will to voluntarily continue with the pregnancy.

"I- uh, I think I do want this," Will says, and smiles - still wobbly - up at Hannibal. Pricks of gold thread into his irises like the rise of fireflies against the deep sapphire sky at dusk, numberless as the stars. "To try this. For them. But I know it's a lot to ask. A child is a- a permanent thing. Would be a permanent thing. Between us." He swallows again, then asks: "Think you could spend the rest of your life co-parenting with someone whose brain is almost literally on fire?"

It takes no effort for Hannibal to smile back at him, the late morning sun coming in through the windows warming them both in the same slant of light. "You will not be sick forever, Will. The circumstances could be less complicated perhaps, but this is still a blessing. 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.'"

Its loveliness increases; it will never/ Pass into nothingness.

"Endymion, " Will notes, and the colour in his eyes spreads with his pleasure like sunrise - before realisation clicks behind it. He gives Hannibal a flat look. "Keats' *brain-sick shepherd-prince,* you asshole."

Hannibal grins at him unrepentantly, delighted to have been caught even as Will's arm turns in his grasp so Will's hand can swat at him. "'For many days,/ Has he been wandering in uncertain ways.' If the hat fits."

"Only because my brain has swollen to fit it," Will grumbles, and steps away to pour himself a drink of water from a pitcher on the nearby coffee table. "Want some?"

Hannibal declines. Smoothly steers the conversation back on track. "We have a child between us already."

Abigail.

Will's brow creases, pausing with his glass almost to his mouth. "That's different."

"Is it?"

"It is, and you know it is. Abigail -" Will takes a sip of his drink to gather his thoughts, wetting his lips before continuing. Firmer than before. "Abigail Hobbs is not entirely dependent in the same way a newborn would be. She's old enough to make her own way, if she wants to. Responsible for herself. You and I would be wholly responsible for this one," a gesture to his belly, "if we decide to go ahead. And we'd be bound to each other through that decision for the rest of our lives."

Hannibal frowns. "Am I so terrible, that the thought of having a permanent reminder of me in your life is giving you second thoughts? Because I believe that a permanent reminder of you

in my life, Will, could only ever be a privilege."

"You say that *now.* Things change. *People* change."

"If you are worried that I would ever shirk my duty and abandon any child of mine," Hannibal says coolly, "the legal documents signing over at least a portion of my assets will be drawn up before the birth. The child will be provided for. As will you, as their mother."

Will's cheeks flare with heat, a scorch of ozone in the air between them. "I don't want your goddamn *money,* Hannibal!" he hisses.

"You'll have it for the child's sake, all the same." For as long as Will should live. Or not.

Will slams down his glass. Hackles up and irritated, he bares his teeth - but mostly holds back the snarl that vibrates at the lowest tone of his words. "Stop being an ass for one whole minute and *listen.* I- we have no way of knowing what the future will bring us. Something might- could go wrong. I could miscarry. The encephalitis- you could be a single parent. There's some other disaster and *I* could be a single parent."

So many worries, all tangled up at the moment with his temper. Fury seems to have given Will the impetus to spit out his concerns about his illness and the pregnancy.

Hannibal sighs, and allows the cold hard chip of ice - borne of his momentary belief that Will had been questioning his honour - lodged in his breastbone to thaw. "Will, forget the encephalitis."

Will - perhaps understandably, since they are discussing a life-altering disorder - gives him a disbelieving, almost scornful, look.

"For a moment, at least. One certainly cannot predict future events exactly if one cannot even measure the present state of the universe precisely: you will drive yourself mad trying to account for every possibility." Hannibal steps around the couch, reaching out to touch Will again, palm against Will's lower back drawing the omega close. Will's next hot, damp breath shudders against Hannibal's collarbone. "Do you see a life flashing before your eyes that is not your own?"

"...Yes," Will whispers: a confession.

"How quickly we form attachments to something that does not yet exist."

"I'm not attached," Will denies with a quick shake of his curls against Hannibal's throat. His hand falling between them again, pressed hesitantly, once more, over his abdomen. "I'm only anticipating attachment."

Will had become attached the moment he had been informed he was pregnant, the tears trembling on his cheeks as he had brought Hannibal's hand to his belly the night before already sweetened with something closer to affection than woe. When he had heard their progeny's heartbeat for the first time, his scent had, yes, sharpened with wild fear, but also flooded with *awe.*

The walls of the room Hannibal has made within himself for Will Graham now stretch so high he can no longer see the fan vaulting he had originally crafted for its ceiling, the columns like trees stretching upwards towards the sun and spreading their branches protectively over the treasures below. The chamber is full of light and music that spreads out into the hallways of Hannibal's Mind Palace around it, the shimmering voices of Fauré's sopranos as angelic as the beings they give air to: *In Paradisum deducant te Angeli; in tuo adventu suscipiant te Martyres et perducant te in civitatem sanctam, Jerusalem.*

"We have a deep-seated need to interact with our children," Hannibal murmurs, his fingers softly stroking over the gentle curve into Will's lower back even as he lingers on the sweet music in his mind. "It helps us discover who we are."

Will stills, lifting his chin just enough his eyes glance across Hannibal's. "Have you ever been a father?"

"I was to my sister," Hannibal tells him. "She wasn't my child, but she was my charge."

Mischa.

The strains of a beautiful song that echo into infinity.

Chorus angelorum te suscipiat, et cum Lazaro quondam paupere aeternam habeas requiem.

"Abigail reminds me so much of her," Hannibal admits - and feels more than sees Will soften against him, chest to chest with the rise and fall of their breaths.

"...Abigail gets to choose if she wants to be parented or not," Will says quietly, after some time has passed. A repeat of his argument from before - and a negotiation, perhaps, for the future.

Hannibal doesn't disagree, changing tack from sentiments and maybes to practicalities. "I'll need you to agree to some further bloodwork being done." Will looks up at him inquiringly. "The entirety of my estate is spread across several countries. Some of them, for inheritance purposes, will require an official paternity test."

Will considers that, drawing his lower lip back between his teeth. "That sounds… complicated."

"I have very well-paid lawyers," Hannibal informs him - and smiles serenely when Will's expression turns exasperated.

Schubert's *Piano Sonata in G Major* is a perfect accompaniment to plans proceeding smoothly as intended, Hannibal's kitchen filling with the scents of ham baking in his oven,

root vegetables coming to gentle boil on his stove. Wine simmers in another pan, as deep and dark a red as the vintage currently staining Hannibal's lips, as the last of Hannibal's stock of liver on the countertop and the carnations Hannibal had ordered to be sent with two letters he had penned between appointments only that afternoon. Bouquets of beautiful red *kaneshon,* with purple *hanashobu* nestled within.

A prettier sight to contemplate than the posies of tear-streaked tissues that Hannibal's patients had crumpled in their fists as they sat in his office that afternoon. One by one, the most desperate and dependent of his patients had come: most who simply could not *bear* the thought of sitting down at the Thanksgiving table with their partners and families, with abusers and neglectful parents, mates and/or spouses. Distant children and the pressure of overwhelming standards to live up to. One omega widow whose seasonal depression strikes particularly hard and black during the winter holidays, faced with an empty house and the mocking twinkle of plastic lights.

("Have you considered taking a long vacation during the winter months?" Hannibal had suggested to her. They both know the woman can afford it; her mate's death had left her a fortune. "It would take you out of the house you claim to be haunting during a hard time, introducing you to new people, and the light and heat of warmer climes should ease some of the seasonal aspects of your depression."

"What," his patient had laughed, amused at the thought of such open indulgence, "just up sticks every year and follow the sun?"

"Would it truly harm you socially or financially to do so?" Hannibal had asked her, and the omega's laughter had stopped. Thoughtful. "Follow the sun. It goes so many wonderful places this time of year, and do we not all deserve to live warmed by its light?")

Sage, lilliput capers, extra virgin olive oil and the zest and juice of one lemon go into a bowl. Lightly mixed. A fleck of the citrus juice catches Hannibal on the thumb and he sucks it off just as his doorbell rings - bright chimes and a brighter burst of sharp flavour on his tongue.

The evening has long since grown dark outside. Sunset had come and gone before Hannibal had even left his office, and his drive to Wolf Trap to feed and exercise Will's dogs had been done under the bars of streetlights and the distant moon.

It is strange, therefore, to have Jack Crawford standing - uninvited - on Hannibal's doorstep the night before a major American holiday, something terribly grim about the agent's mouth even as his expression lightens, politely, when Hannibal swings open the door.

"Dr. Lecter."

"Jack," Hannibal returns. Allows his question to sit on his face, even as he steps back to allow the other man entry into his home: "What can I do for you this evening?"

Jack only takes one step forwards - into the light inside, but not allowing Hannibal to close the door. This appears to be only a flying visit then; Jack does not intend to linger overlong. "Are you aware that Will Graham called in sick to work today?"

Hannibal frowns. “You drove all the way to Baltimore just to ask me about Will Graham taking a sick day?”

“An indeterminate length of sick days, in fact,” says Jack. “I actually drove all the way to Wolf Trap before coming here, but Will wasn’t home.”

Such a shame that Jack hadn’t informed Hannibal of his intended travel plans that evening; he might have saved Hannibal several hours of journeying to and fro.

Hannibal’s eyes narrow as he tilts his head, taking a delicate sniff of the air - and Jack. The FBI agent’s alpha scent almost bullish with black pepper and patchouli, insulted and aggrieved under his veneer of cordial calm. Jack feels wronged by someone that isn’t Hannibal.

Jack feels wronged by *Will.* For Will calling in sick to work and thus being unavailable to Jack.

“Figured I’d come ask you if you know where he is,” Jack says, casually betraying once more just how *gossipy* the FBI is as an organisation, “since you were the last one seen with him at the Academy yesterday, but I got my answer with his car parked out front. Seems Will isn’t too sick to drive.”

“That last one’s a bit suppositional, Jack,” Hannibal says mildly. After making such a blatant implication, he’s a little surprised Jack isn’t craning his neck to look over Hannibal’s shoulders to where he seems to believe Will is hiding in Hannibal’s home. Nefariously squirrelled away from his FBI duties - or perhaps, minding Hannibal's stove.

The vegetables will be done soon.

“That *is* Will Graham’s car, isn’t it?” Jack asks, with a nod behind himself into the dark, where Will’s car is still parked on the kerb in front of Hannibal’s house.

“It is,” Hannibal confirms. “And Will *was* not too sick, officially, to drive it here yesterday before I took him to the hospital.”

Jack’s brows draw down like a ponderous thundercloud. “That seems like an overreaction. He had a touch of the flu, didn’t he?”

“No. It was not an overreaction.” Even if Will *had* only had flu bad enough to give him the persistent symptoms he had been visibly experiencing.

A prick of conscience parts Jack’s clouds, and some of the aggressiveness of his stance fades as he rests his weight back heavily on his heels. Concerned. “It’s serious then?”

Hannibal does not yield. “It is Will’s decision as to whether or not he wishes to disclose that kind of information, Jack. But I will tell you this,” he lowers his voice, consonants hard and precise as the truth. “You should not expect Will Graham to help you with any of your cases for at least the next few months.”

Jack frowns, still plagued by his conscience and bewildered by these revelations. He had arrived at Hannibal's home that evening all but looking to give Will Graham his marching orders out the door and back to the BAU, but will be departing with no Will - and no prospect of Will's assistance at work for the foreseeable future - and more questions. "...Then I suppose I should let you get on with your evening, doctor. It smells like you've got something delicious waiting for you in the kitchen."

The vegetables will definitely be done by now. Hannibal pulls his door open just half an inch wider. "You are more than welcome to stay for dinner, Jack."

"No, no." Jack is blustering a bit now, embarrassed at the courteous invitation after his own lack of courtesy. "Bella and I actually have plans to prepare something for tomorrow. She'll be expecting me."

"Of course. May I take the opportunity to wish you both a happy Thanksgiving?"

"And you, Dr. Lecter." Jack dips his head politely, and takes a quick step backwards back out into the night. "Give my best to Will as well if you see him before I do, if you'd please?" Coughing, to clear his throat of awkwardness: "Tell him to get well soon."

So he can get back to work.

"I will," Hannibal promises - and, remorseless, takes a rather grim amount of pleasure in allowing his front door to swing shut again as Jack Crawford departs.

Chapter End Notes

Quenelle: (from German *Knödel*, 'noodle/dumpling') a mixture of creamed fish/meat, sometimes combined with breadcrumbs, bound with egg and formed into an egg-like shape before being cooked - usually by poaching. Formerly used as a garnish, today, quenelles can be a dish in their own right.
By extension, quenelles may also be other (soft) foods formed into a similar shape, such as ice-cream, sorbet, or mashed potatoes.

A book is a garden, an orchard, a storehouse, a party, a company by the way, a counselor, a multitude of counselors. – Charles Baudelaire
Horror and doubt distract
His troubled thoughts and from the bottom stir
The Hell within him, for within him Hell
He brings and round about him, nor from Hell
One step no more than from himself can fly
By change of place. - John Milton, *Paradise Lost*
A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:/ Its loveliness increases; it will never/ Pass into nothingness - John Keats, excerpt from Book I of *Endymion*
Brain-sick shepherd-prince,

What promise hast thou faithful guarded since
The day of sacrifice? Or, have new sorrows
Come with the constant dawn upon thy morrows?
Alas! 'tis his old grief. For many days,
Has he been wandering in uncertain ways. - John Keats, excerpt from Book II of *Endymion*
The uncertainty principle signaled an end to Laplace's dream of a theory of science, a model of the universe that would be completely deterministic: one certainly cannot predict future events exactly if one cannot even measure the present state of the universe precisely! - Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*

I - unfortunately - took inspiration for the conversation Hannibal and Dominic have about rectal foreign body removals from real-life surgical anecdotes I found online. Every. Single. One. (Gentle reader, please do not shove anything up your ass that is a) made of fragile glass, b) does not have a flared base, and/or c) does not have a sturdy method of retrieval. And if you should get something stuck up your ass and it won't come out after a little straining, *please go see your doctor rather than attempting to remove it yourself.*)

Yes, we're back to Hannibal playing Fauré's Requiem in his head again: this time, *In Paradisum*. Its high, soft, and shimming notes are ethereal, and seem to me to be full of hope for things to come. More explicitly, about the beginning of a new life (whether that is linked to the hopes for an unborn child, or for moving from this life into the next). I knew *In Paradisum* had been used somewhere in the show, but I had to remind myself exactly where - and the answer is S2 *Su-zakana*, a background to Will and Hannibal together in the car. (Y'know. That episode about the crisis of birth and rebirth with the introduction of Margot, butterfly metaphors, and people stuffed inside of horses…) So I think I'm on-theme here.

In Japanese floriography (*hanakotoba*), carnations (*kaneshon*) represent familial (often maternal) love, whilst the Japanese iris (*hanashobu*) represents glad tidings/good news.

Hannibal was cooking calf's liver with sage salsa verde, caper, raisins, potatoes and crispy ham in the final scene.

canapé

Chapter Summary

Thanks-giving and Thanksgivukkah.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“In my defence,” Beverly says, looking up from where she is *blatantly* googling encephalitis on her phone so she can frown melodramatically at, first, the dog plushie with a bandaged head that she had brought Will as a *get well soon* gift and, second, Will’s own head - which is very much bandage-free -, “you just said ‘head injury’ on the phone.”

“Pretty sure I said that I had a problem in my brain,” says Will, absently rubbing one of the plushie’s (extremely) soft floppy ears between forefinger and thumb as he watches Beverly tap through to wikipedia, her chair pulled up beside his hospital bed. God, Will misses his dogs.

“Yeah, but you’re known for being self-deprecating and shitheads are *always* saying you have a problem in the brain due to Lounds and her readers,” Beverly points out - reasonably, annoyingly enough. “When have I ever taken that seriously?”

“I’m touched by your support,” Will says - *mostly* - without sarcasm. It feels good to have someone in his corner. It feels good to see a *familiar* friendly face when he’s stuck in hospital, the long hours stretching out before him otherwise fairly bleak. “And the dog.”

“He has your eyes,” Beverly says, cheerfully ignoring the burst capillaries in Will’s own whites from excess vomiting to nod at the machine-embroidered big blue eyes *get well soon* puppy is sporting. “Definitely no chance of your skull getting sawn open for a matching bandage?”

“Don’t think that’s in the official autoimmune encephalitis treatment plan, sorry.”

Beverly just snorts, still shamelessly browsing wikipedia for information on Will’s condition. In front of him. “...Only *you* could develop encephalitis just to wriggle out of a social invite. Good ol’ migraines too plebeian for you, Graham? Even your encephalopathies are rarefied. They only described your version of the disease in *2007*.”

“As you can see,” Will says dryly, with a gesture down the length of himself, cannula, hospital bed and machines around him all, “I am deeply committed to being on-trend.” Beverly’s frown deepens into something sincere, worry creasing her mouth, her brow, the corners of her red-limned eyes, and Will sighs. “I can’t promise you I’ll be fine, Beverly. But

I am getting the best treatment money can buy to give me the best chance at being fine again."

Beverly's worry doesn't ease completely, but Will can see the moment she decides to try and accept the things she cannot change and change what she *can* - which is the somewhat morose air hanging tragically over Will's little fancy hospital suite. "Yeah - uh, should I *ask* if FBI insurance is covering this place? This room is something else." Will gives her a look - *no, we will* not *be discussing that* - and Beverly holds up her hands. "Okay, okay!"

It's getting on towards lunchtime and Hannibal had told Will to eat if he was hungry before Hannibal arrived, so they switch on the TV in the room to the usual Thanksgiving crap, and Beverly rises from her seat to help steady Will as he shakily gets out of bed. He'd been able to get washed and dressed into clean pyjamas that morning - thank *God* -, but, with his immunosuppressant medicines, after another night where he'd awoken halfway down the corridor and a morning of vomiting up everything he'd tried to eat, Will is *tired,* and all his joints feel like limp noodles.

Beverly does the polite thing when Will is upright on his own two feet, putting distance between their bodies and not presuming Will needs more support than he has asked for, but Will sways rather dangerously and she moves back in immediately, her hand around his back, on his hip, his chest turned into her side.

Up close and under the sharper flash of alpha concern, Beverly smells of nutmeg and very deep smoky vanilla today, the scent of the oils and spices she has clearly been cooking with recently trapped in her clothes and hair. She's warm and she smells good. And strong. And kind. And like the closest thing Will has to normality at the moment. The bone-deep tiredness Will can feel in his *soul* is all but begging for him to collapse on her and let this alpha he can trust take his weight.

Will absolutely does not have the kind of relationship with Beverly Katz where he would feel comfortable just collapsing on her, or expect her to deal with him collapsing on her and *not* dump his ass as a friendly acquaintance/maybe-friend for being too forward. It's one thing for the nurses to handle that sort of thing - they're being *paid* to put up with Will's problems -, but a colleague is another.

Will is doing rather a shit job of getting Beverly to not be concerned. "Shit."

"Sure you don't want to just stay here to eat?" The red has spread in Beverly's eyes, the worry with it. Her grip doesn't waver. "I mean, your pillows look pretty cushy, and I could just pull the table over to the bed."

"I want to get up," Will says stubbornly. He feels weak enough at the moment without *showing* everyone how weak he is.

"And I want you not to fold over like my willpower does every time I walk past a Krispy Kremes," Beverly says flatly. "If I let you bust up your pretty nose, your groupies will kill me. We gotta compromise."

"Why do people always comment on my nose?"

“I could always comment on your ass.”

“Yeah, don’t,” says Will. Beverly would need to have brought whiskey for him to allow that.

“See,” says Beverly, ruthlessly cheerful as she hikes Will up a bit by the hip where he’s slipping down against her ribcage, “we’re compromising already. Lemme walk you to the table.”

Will nods, grumbling about the sass, but they are interrupted before they can take a single awkward step by a nurse bustling into the room.

“It’s time to take your vitals again, Mstr - *oh!*”

From what Will had seen of her at breakfast, this nurse, Carla, is an unflappably cheerful woman. Middle-aged. Married. She had greeted the morning and Will by flinging back his curtains to sunshine and announcing herself, bright tiny studs shaped like watermelons in the lobes of her ears. Utterly resistant to all of Will’s grouchy dismay at, firstly, being woken, and, secondly, hearing the nurse *totally unironically* refer to herself as ‘another happy member of Team Will!’ Dedicated to his care.

Mouth full of the dry toast he had been assigned to help him with his morning sickness before breakfast, Will had simply stared at Carla in horror. And realised, then, when he could *smell* his own horror in his scent and Carla simply continued about his ward, footloose and fancy-free, that Carla, sunny a person as she seemed to be, was *an utterly oblivious, nose-blind beta.*

The nurse can identify dynamics, but the subtleties of other people’s scents is a language beyond her ken. Will is already cringing away from Beverly before Carla opens her mouth again - “I didn’t realise your alpha was here, Mstr. Graham. Let me take the opportunity to offer congratulations to you both!”

“...Uh,” says Beverly.

“I’m unmated and she’s *a friend,*” Will says loudly, before Carla can say or assume anything else. It doesn’t take much to splash out all his personal information for everyone to see.

“Oh!” says the nurse. Then, embarrassed at her slip: “*Oh.* I’m sorry, I- I’ll just come back in a little bit, shall I?” She turns heel and bustles out again, leaving Will to his certain doom.

The TV continues to blatter nonsense in the background.

“...‘Congratulations’?” Beverly asks after a few otherwise silent moments. Carefully.

Beverly, Will knows, would probably accept being told that she’s asking about something personal and Will would rather not talk about it. But Beverly is also smart enough that it wouldn’t take a lot for her to make the leap from Will telling her that much to her figuring out the rest, so Will might as well just tell her the truth.

There aren’t *that* many reasons anyone offers an (assumed) alpha-omega couple congratulations.

“I’m pregnant,” Will says with a sigh, and hesitantly allows himself to lean his weight on Beverly again when she doesn’t seem - by look or smell - to be rejecting the motion. Not wanting to topple back onto the bed behind him again, a little weak-kneed from standing for so long. “First trimester. On top of the encephalitis.”

“...Huh,” says Beverly, and hardly seems to notice that she’s still supporting him even though they’re pretty much outright - albeit extremely awkwardly - hugging in the middle of Will’s ward. “Congratulations, I guess? It *is* a *congratulations* kind of announcement, right?”

Will nods, sure on that point now at least.

“And the babydaddy?” Beverly inquires.

“Is aware,” Will says. “And supportive.”

Beverly nods, accepting the little she has been given. For now. And then grins. “First time I’ve heard of baby fever being so literal though.”

“...I hate you,” Will says, and Beverly laughs at him, helping him totter his way over to the little dining table that’s in his room. “Don’t tell anyone about my condition. Please.”

“The brain thing, or the bun in the oven thing?”

“Both.” Will flops down into his seat with all the grace of a gosling first toppling out of its nest. But heavier. “I’d prefer to talk to people about it - them - in my own time.”

“No problem,” Beverly promises him, smiling as she takes the chair opposite him. “Can I at least mention you’re in hospital if people ask, though? Because they’re gonna ask. I work with some nosey individuals.”

And Beverly their ringleader. “Go for it. Gotta feed the beasts *something*.”

The reward for Will’s generosity is food: a sweet potato salad with bacon, the gochujang meatballs, and a huge container full of the latkes Beverly had promised him in the park, still warm and already pre-sprinkled with salt and pepper. More, smaller, containers yield cream cheese with chives, sliced hard-boiled eggs and smoked salmon to top the latkes with, and Will has already slathered his first latke with the lot of it and got half the potato fritter into his mouth before he remembers to offer Beverly a garbled *Happy Hanukkah.*

(So help him - he’d vomited up the entirety of his breakfast, and the smell of Beverly’s food has made him hungry.)

“Happy Thanksgivukkah,” Beverly returns, and seems content to watch Will demolish two latkes before beginning to eat the more carefully-constructed one she’d made-up on her own plate. A rather pleased ring of red around her irises, her alpha sensibilities contented by seeing an omega in her - temporary - care provided for. Possibly pacing herself for the extra food incoming that Will has promised her on Hannibal’s - offered - behalf.

Will is just happy to have something - tasty - in his stomach again, though he pauses when he picks up his first meatball. Eyes the cream cheese on the table curiously as well. “You don’t

keep kosher?"

"You know *kashrut*?" Beverly asks, and grins at Will's wobbly handwave: universal for *eh, vaguely.* "I don't keep kosher, except when I'm at my Bubbe and Zayde's house. Some special occasions. The bacon in the potato salad didn't give that away?"

That… probably should have been Will's first clue. "Could be turkey bacon."

"It's not turkey bacon," says Beverly, and adds another piece of salmon to her latke. Building a tower. "Too many good pork recipes from my mom's side of the family. You got any restrictions?"

"Nope. Food's food," Will says with a dismissive shrug, and pops the meatball into his mouth to chew.

Will and his colleague are already eating when Hannibal arrives. Hannibal bears them no acrimony for doing so - he had told Will to eat whenever he was hungry rather than waiting on politeness and depriving himself and their growing child of needed sustenance -, though he is somewhat displeased to realise that, not only is Will's colleague an alpha, she is one of *the* alphas whose scent Hannibal has repeatedly detected on Will's clothing.

The alpha smiles when she spots Hannibal at the door, wiping her hands clean as she bounds to greet him, palm outstretched with an inviting friendliness Hannibal does not find himself echoing. "*You* must be the one we're waiting for. Beverly Katz. How d'you do?"

"Very well, thank you," says Hannibal, and adjusts the strap of the large bag over his shoulder so he can take Katz's hand to shake. Her grip is as firm as his, but she doesn't linger. Not posturing in front of the omega in their company. "Dr. Hannibal Lecter. I hope I didn't keep you both waiting too long."

"'Fraid we started without you," says Katz, leading the way back to the table she and Will are sitting at and pushing out a third seat for Hannibal. "But Will said you wouldn't mind?"

"Will was correct," Hannibal says, and sets his bag down to gather up Will's face in his hands, ignoring entirely that Will still has his cheeks stuffed with food. Fingers sweep briefly over the pulse in Will's throat, thumbs rubbing tenderly across the deep purple shadows beneath Will's bloodshot eyes. A low fever is still burning in Will's cheeks, hot across his forehead. "How are you today?"

"Tired, mostly," Will says after swallowing and Hannibal can feel it, the weariness that has Will leaning heavily into his hands. "Not sleeping enough. Not sleeping correctly. And the immunosuppressants make me feel like shit."

“To quote an old adage, I’m afraid it will get worse before it can get better.” Will grimaces, and Hannibal permits himself one brief squeeze of the omega’s shoulder before he takes a seat. “Let me feed you something to take your mind off it, at least.” Eyeing up Katz’s spread - “Or should that be, feed you *more*?”

Latkes and toppings, meatballs, some kind of potato salad...

“Holidays are for indulgence,” says Katz easily, and smiles without shame. Hannibal cannot disagree with her argument. “If I let a friend go hungry, all my ancestors will haunt my ass.”

“To cook for another is an act of care,” says Hannibal, and carefully pushes some of Katz’s containers of food to the side to make room for his own. Opened, one by one: “A pineapple-fennel salad with ginger-sesame dressing, and chargrilled pork leg with asparagus. Forgive me,” he says to Katz before the woman can speak, “I only belatedly recalled that Will had mentioned that you had originally invited him to your home for a combination celebration of Thanksgiving and Hanukkah - and all that implies -, and I had already prepared the pork. I don't know if you have any dietary restrictions, but I took the liberty of preparing a meat dish for you as well without pork or dairy.” Produced in another container, and placed directly in front of Katz: “Peppercorn mutton.”

Something of a half-truth. Hannibal had prepared the pig's leg in the full knowledge that it was likely he would share it with no-one but Will, and taken extra care with the dish as a result. Sourcing the meat himself, tenderising the cuts with loving firmness before charring them in his griddle pan after the vegetables.

The mutton had been left to marinade for an hour whilst Hannibal had been preparing the more important dishes, and then sautéed quickly in a skillet.

“It all looks great!” Katz says, and the genuine note of enthusiasm in her voice goes some way to softening the blow of her then immediately trampling all over Hannibal’s plans: “Thanks for the consideration, but I don’t keep kosher.”

“More for everyone,” Will blithely observes, and unintentionally adds insult to injury by completely bypassing the container of beautifully-cooked pork, courgettes, asparagus and crumbled goat’s cheese that Hannibal had arranged in front of him to reach over the small table and fork himself a piece of the mutton instead.

Hannibal has to close his eyes for a moment, breath *sighing* out of his nose. “Indeed.”

They eat. Katz’s presentation is somewhat lacking and she uses cheaper - and slightly more processed - ingredients in her cooking than Hannibal would buy himself, but her food is bright and flavourful. Perfectly edible, which is more than Hannibal can say about some dishes other people have confronted him with before.

Will pauses frequently between bites to take quick little sips of water, but he manages to eat, Hannibal is pleased to note, a healthy portion of everything on the table. Even - eventually - the pork, white teeth and the pink rose bow of his lips closing delicately over the tines of his fork, pork, pineapple, and a neat square of courgette. Juices from the meat and fruit, the

ginger-sesame dressing, smear his lower lip for but a moment, smoothly, instinctively, licked away with the brief slip of his tongue.

Hannibal produces individual miniature Sachertortes for their dessert - to Katz's vocal delight and Will's slower, wearier smile -, and they request whipped cream and hot chocolate to accompany the cakes from the hospital kitchens. (Will had declined the traditional Thanksgiving lunch offered by the hospital, after all, so they may as well get that meal's worth out of Noble Hills.)

"You're the Dr. Lecter that assisted us with the Shrike case, right?" Katz asks whilst they wait. When both Will and Hannibal look at her askance - "Sorry, I've been trying to place why your name sounded so familiar since you introduced yourself."

"I did," Hannibal says, tucking the last of their other leftovers away in his bag, "yes."

"Can't have been a fun first gig."

"Unfortunately, I can say I have actually had worse first days on a job."

"Dr. Lecter used to be an ER surgeon," Will says in response to Katz's curious noise. "He's the one who saved Abigail Hobbs' life after her father-" a hesitant pause, Will's hand fluttering thoughtlessly to his throat before he realises what he has done and removes it again, "yeah."

A silent *oh* from Katz, some tension loosing in her spine the way it always does in people when informed the man in front of them is a doctor who has saved others' lives. Her dark eyes are serious on Hannibal. "She's lucky you were there."

"She doesn't seem to be *feeling* terribly lucky," Will says quietly. He's drooping in his seat.

Hannibal reaches over to squeeze his forearm. "She is lucky that we were *both* there in the kitchen that day. The slightest change…" Hannibal trails off delicately, looking seriously back at Katz. "It would not have taken much to set Miss Hobbs' fate on a much more tragic path."

Depending on one's definition of *tragic* in the short and long-term, Hannibal allows. Abigail has so much potential; it would be a loss, certainly, in Hannibal's view of the world, for her to have died before being able to act as her own individual self in the world, unburdened of the expectations of her father.

"I need the toilet," Will says, his movements slow and heavy as he turns himself to the side in his seat. Putting an abrupt and deliberate end to the conversation.

Hannibal shifts, about to offer him a hand up at least - only to have his gesture waved away before he has done much more than twitch in Will's direction. Unaccustomed to being so easily read, Hannibal is startled into stillness once more.

Will pads wearily away to his bathroom, the pebble he has just tossed so idly into Hannibal's pool of thought sinking slowly to settle in the sediment at the bottom. Making itself a home

there.

“...Perhaps we should move the table closer to the bed now?” Hannibal suggests to Katz, in deference to the way their third - ill - companion is so clearly wilting in front of them, and receives a quick nod - and her assistance in lifting and moving the table across the room - in response.

The chairs and their belongings follow. Glasses topped up with fresh water.

“Have you been together since the case?” Katz asks, and Hannibal pauses. Looks up, directly, at the woman before him, her frank, open expression. Free of maliciousness. But curious.

“...I performed Will’s recent psychological evaluation at the request of the FBI.”

“And the implications of that are now scandalous,” Katz informs him, eyebrows raised, “because you didn’t answer my question.” She smiles at whatever she assumes she sees in Hannibal’s expression, softening the edges of her persistent inquisitiveness. “It’s pretty hard *not* to notice. Will’s infamous for being a loner. Keeps people out of his bubble unless he likes them, or he really needs the help. But you’re just… bubbling right into his bubble, and he hasn’t tensed up at it once. Like he’s used to it by now.”

The BAU is not entirely lacking in people with observational skills, even when Will isn’t there.

Hannibal hums, a low, flat note. “The evocative nature of body language.” The stories that are always there, should one know how to read them. “I hope you understand, Ms. Katz, but there are some things I would prefer not to discuss behind Will’s back.”

“Of course,” Katz cordially agrees - before pointedly raising her voice loud enough for Will to hear her in the bathroom. “Will, are you and Dr. Lecter here a thing?”

The toilet flushes, and Will’s head pokes out of the bathroom door half a minute later like some small wary wild thing peering out of its burrow for predators. “...What?”

“You,” Katz repeats. “Dr. Lecter. A thing?” Will’s mouth opens, clearly about to protest - “I have *eyes,* Will.”

Will glances at Hannibal.

Hannibal looks back at him placidly, head tilted just slightly to one side: *the choice is yours* .

Will sighs. *Alright.* “She already knows about the baby,” he says to Hannibal. “One of the nurses gave it away - she thought Bev was my alpha and congratulated us. The rest was too easy to extrapolate, so I told her.” He shuffles closer, pathetically contrite. “Sorry.”

“The truth will out,” Hannibal acknowledges ambivalently. Why would it pain him to have others know that he has marked a claim on Will Graham so indelibly? A minor obfuscation of the timeline may be required to have ethical considerations about their relationship dismissed, but otherwise, Will Graham and the child in his womb are both currently a walking symbol of Hannibal’s virility. And charisma, to have even gotten the infamously

aloof omega into bed to be bred in the first place. “Will is my friend, Ms. Katz. The Minnesota Shrike case certainly bonded us together as comrades in adversity, but what has developed since then has been a surprise to us both.” A pointed glance to Will’s abdomen as Will comes to stand beside him - “Some developments more surprising than others.”

“After my eval we-” Will gestures something indecipherably in the air, searching for words as his weight shifts slowly from one foot to the other. (Bare feet on the tile floor - *where* are his slippers?) “We’re not *together*- together. But- uh-” hand spread on his belly again, a pose he seems to be adopting - already - as a position to anchor him, taking comfort in its potential, “we’re doing this together. Trying to. It’s complicated.”

“And *private,* ” Hannibal emphasises to their inquisitive guest. Resisting the urge to ground Will further with an arm around his back in such observant company. Too self-aware now of the scrutiny of his friend, Will wouldn’t thank Hannibal for it.

Ms. Beverly Katz’s expression gives voice to the words she - politely - does not speak: *I’ll say.*

Don’t say, implores Will’s expression.

Don’t dare, says Hannibal’s, and he smiles at Katz with that warning in his eyes.

The alpha takes the hint. “Sorry for stumbling onto your secret before you were both ready to share it,” she says, and has the courtesy to bow her head with the words, neck momentarily bared to their fangs, to show her contrition. “But… *b’sha’ah tovah?* I’m happy for you both.”

Will’s scent blooms soft and sweet beside Hannibal, his relief at his colleague’s acceptance evident as he relaxes. Even taking a seat on his bed without complaint, nudging aside the stuffed toy he seems to have acquired and leaning back against the raised upper portion of the mattress with his legs half-folded under him.

The position rucks up the cuffs of his pyjama bottoms, and Hannibal adjusts his own position just enough to lay his hand on the jut of Will’s nearest ankle, his thumb rubbing indolently back and forth over the deceptively strong arch of Will’s foot. The corner of the table hides the movement from the eyes of their company, and Will’s shiver is assumed to be because of his illness.

A beta nurse finally brings them the requested hot chocolates and cream, - belatedly, it seems - taking and recording Will’s vitals before swiftly disappearing again. No doubt the culprit of the earlier *faux pas.* Hannibal must get her name.

“You’re glaring,” Will informs Hannibal, not even *looking* at Hannibal as he sips his hot chocolate.

“How do you know he’s glaring?” Katz asks Will with open fascination, as though Hannibal isn’t sitting there with them both. “I didn’t see his face move.”

“His face doesn’t *move,* precisely,” Will explains, glancing up at her, “it - oh, there you go.” Laughter threaded through his voice as Hannibal *does* move to turn an unimpressed stare on

him - “Glaring.”

“Personally, I’d describe that as more of a glower,” says Katz with another look at Hannibal’s face, and grins when Hannibal turns to her, cheerfully lifting her hot chocolate to him in a toast. “Very impressive, Dr. Lecter.”

They eat the Sachertortes with the cream, then use the cards Katz has brought with her to gamble outrageously over the chocolate gelt that Katz has *also* brought. After several games of Black Lady and then one thoroughly unimpressive game of Go Fish, Will rouses himself enough to teach his guests how to play Bourré, and then they all round off their afternoon with a short game of Crash - that Will wins with very little effort in the first round when both Hannibal and Katz end up with appalling hands.

The nurse returns shortly after that to hook Will up to his daily dose of corticosteroids and Ms. Katz takes that as her cue to leave, commanding Will to *get well soon* one last time before sweeping out of the door. As much a hurricane in her departure as she had been whilst she stayed.

If little else, Hannibal, grudgingly, respects the woman’s particularly determined kind of carnage.

“So what are *you* thankful for this year?” Will teases tiredly as the drugs start dripping their way into his system, smiling crookedly back at the quiet huff of Hannibal’s amusement.

Will Graham does not know how lucky he is that Hannibal finds his cheek entertaining.

“I,” Hannibal says, leaning in towards the other man so he can draw a blanket up and over Will’s shoulders before the steroids can chill too much of Will’s blood, “am thankful that you appear to be keeping down your lunch.”

Will *mmm*s at him, lolling back into the pillows propped up behind himself. “Morgan-Moore started discussing antiemetics yesterday after you left. Sleep aids. Your Sutcliffe was too busy trying to get me to agree to be part of a formal study - they’ve confirmed the anti-NMDAR encephalitis diagnosis and he’s all aflutter about it. Like a vulture. And a carcass. In the desert.”

...Hannibal may need to invite Donald over for dinner. “It’s so rare to be able to study the neurological effect of your type of malady on a person’s mind. Let alone the mind of a pregnant individual. Even in these times, we know so little about the brain.”

Will frowns, sifting through the layers of Hannibal’s words. “...You think I should do it?” Jaded from too many years of being head-hunted for psychological studies about his empathy.

“I think, should you agree to be part of a study, you could be helping to advance our medical understanding of autoimmune encephalopathies. How they present themselves in patients who are pregnant, and how they might be treated.”

Hannibal doesn't particularly care if Will agrees to Donald's study or not, provided that Will is treated with the same high level of medical care regardless of his decision. Donald will be severely displeased should Will say no, but Donald's favour is hardly a great loss to Hannibal.

Not that Donald is aware of that yet.

"...Nothing to do with my empathy?" Will asks. Dubious.

"The projector rather than the projected image, to use Dr. Sutcliffe's own metaphor."

Will *huh*s rather softly at that. Truly unaccustomed to being sought for his physical circumstances rather than his mental ones. "...*You* wouldn't publish anything about me, would you?"

Hannibal considers the question with the seriousness it deserves. He has no intention of publishing anything about Will at the moment - Hannibal needs neither the acclaim nor the scrutiny of his ethics such a publication would attract, and the cordiality of his relationship with Will would undoubtedly take damage in the aftermath -, but it is impossible to rule out the prospect entirely. Plans change, and Hannibal would be a fool to discard such a trick from his hand outright rather than saving it for possible use later in the game. So, quite truthfully:

"It is generally considered unethical to conduct studies on one's own sexual and/or life partners," Hannibal says, "but, if there were ever anything that might be of real and significant therapeutic value to others, I'd abstract it in a form that would be totally unrecognisable."

A tic twitches in Will's jaw, and he turns his head away. "Just do me a favour and publish it posthumously." Grouchy because there had been no blanket denial.

"After your death or mine?"

"Whichever comes first," Will grouses pointedly to the nearby window, and rather pettishly picks up the stuffed toy… dog… on the bed beside him to fiddle with its floppy ears on his lap. "No ovarian teratoma either, by the way. Like the sonographer said. They want to do a full-body MRI to look everywhere else, just in case, but they said that should wait a few more weeks. Plasmapheresis until then."

Which will leave Will feeling even more drained than he already is. He will need a great deal - of food, rest, hope and care - to buoy him through the weeks to come.

Hannibal reaches out to stroke over Will's ankle bone again, a touch of warmth against the cool flesh. (Will, very charitably, does not kick him, which Hannibal takes as a positive sign.) "If they truly expected to find a tumour, they would have put you on an initial course of IVIG rather than corticosteroids."

"Aren't I supposed to be hoping for a tumour? That was the positive outcome, right?" Forgetting his current inclination towards fractiousness in his desire for both comfort and knowledge, Will glances back at Hannibal. Perceptive thing: what he reads in Hannibal's

expression as an answer makes his shoulders slump. “Life would be simpler if they could always just cut out the part of you that’s gone wrong.”

No scalpel made by either man or machine is fine enough to excise the shadows from a soul. “Some parts of ourselves are harder to replace than others,” Hannibal says, and pauses delicately for a moment as Will reaches up to scrub at his eyes with the heel of his palms, the IV line going with him. The faintest tang of wet warm salt is in the air, not wholly unlike when a brisk, humid wind turns suddenly and blows in from the Chesapeake Bay. “I should let you sleep.”

Will *hmph*s. “The steroids cause insomnia, apparently. That’s why they’re giving them to me in the afternoons now rather than at night.”

“The side-effects could, perhaps, be overcome if you were to try nesting -” Hannibal suggests, only to be interrupted by Will making a thoroughly disgusted *grumble* at the back of his throat. “Will.”

“I am *not* nesting here.”

Hannibal has to physically bite his tongue. *Obstinate boy.* Many omegas would be over the *moon* to be offered a private nesting area in their hospital ward: a place to de-stress alone or with family, warm and safe and out of sight of passers-by.

Will, of course, appears to be deeply disgruntled by such luxury, and glares rather distrustfully over at the curtained-off section of his suite. A very *particular* kind of nest-builder.

“If you don’t like the nesting materials the hospital has provided,” Hannibal suggests diplomatically, “I can always fetch you whatever you prefer from your house.” Or buy Will new materials entirely.

“And have them gawked at by strangers?” Will scoffs. “No.” Before, stiffly, remembering his manners - “Thank you.”

Even after changing the topic Will remains standoffish for the rest of the time Hannibal stays with him, obviously still piqued by the *thought* of any nest of his being opened up to the perusal of judgemental strangers. It is both a tantalising and terrible warning sign for what Will may be like should a partner try to enter his nest during heat or when Will has wrapped himself up in his nest with their baby, and suggests Hannibal will have *months* of difficulty ahead of him as Will gets broodier and more territorial the further along in the pregnancy he gets. A vicious protector of all that is his.

Hannibal leaves Will reading one of the novels Hannibal had brought him, a chunk of chocolate gelt tucked into his cheek to hopefully sweeten his temper.

There is no tinny music piped into the elevators at Noble Hills to distract Hannibal from planning out the meals he will prepare the following week, mentally laying out his supplies on his kitchen countertops, deciding which ingredients he will have to buy or otherwise bring in. Along with their winter fare of root vegetables, the farmers’ markets should all be filled

with bright citrus fruits this month, oranges and clementines to be placed in the feet of Christmas stockings as the traditional gift of wealth and plenty. Wrapped with ribbons and studded with cloves as glorious, sweet-smelling decorations.

Will would no doubt appreciate some seafood: salmon again, perhaps, full of useful omega-3 fats, iodine and selenium. Cooked shrimp, high in protein. Hannibal still has some tender, choice cuts of loin waiting in his fridge to be used, a string of fresh, home-made sausages on a plate that need to become part of either a breakfast or a stew if Will's dogs don't eat them all first.

Three floors down, the elevator pauses, and the doors slide smoothly apart.

"Oh, Hannibal!"

Ellen Komeda breezes into the elevator compartment in all her holiday finery, the very essence of *all dressed up and nowhere to go.* Under her winter coat, Ellen's wool dress is a vibrant navy blue, and she is wearing the multistrand necklace of grey akoya pearls that her late husband once gave to her as a birthday gift around her throat. Matching earrings as well.

The set, Hannibal knows, is a particular favourite of Ellen's - and a tactical weapon she deploys at least twice-yearly when attending gatherings with her former in-laws.

"Ellen," Hannibal greets politely, smiling when he bows his head over the alpha's gloved hand and she flaps him mock-exasperatedly away. "I would say that it is a delight to see you, as always, but our location implies something less-than-delightful must have brought you here."

Ellen sighs, a great gust of breath that raises and then drops her shoulders like a scrawny seabird has suddenly dived under the waves for fish. "A family tiff, I'm afraid."

Hannibal frowns. "You're not injured?"

"Oh, no. My nephew," Ellen explains, sounding lamentably mournful. The elevator doors slide shut once more. "There was something of a row at the family dinner, and a terribly unfortunate patch of ice. He has a broken leg, relatively uncomplicated, so he'll be out tomorrow."

"Just in time for the Black Friday traffic."

"Well, he shan't have to brave it for too far," Ellen says, and something rather hard tightens around her mouth when she glances away from Hannibal. The camphor-tuberose very heavy in her scent. "It's been decided that he'll be staying with me for a little while. I have the room, you know."

Hannibal tilts his head, curious. "Perhaps, after his leg has had a little chance to heal, he might enjoy some of Baltimore's social events."

"He just might," Ellen agrees, thoughtful - before gently turning the conversation back on Hannibal. "And you? Who might you be visiting in hospital on Thanksgiving, Hannibal? I do

hope one of your patients hasn't taken a turn for the worse…?"

"No, I was here to see my -" Quite bewilderingly, Hannibal stalls, his great multilingual lexicon unusually failing him. How does he describe Will? "Friend."

Weak.

With the context of their conversation at the performance of *Norma,* Ellen Komeda guesses close to the truth behind Hannibal's strange pause, her face lighting up, first, in curious astonishment, and then with genuine pleasure on his behalf. "Oh, I *see.* I hope it's nothing serious?"

"It's-" Hannibal clears his throat as they reach the ground floor and, together, step off the elevator. Feeling unusually wrong-footed. "Yes, it is."

"Oh dear!"

"But treatable. It will take some time, but with the right medicines, and good care…"

"That is very good to hear," Ellen says, laying her hand on Hannibal's arm in a warm, simple gesture of support. Wholly sincere as she looks up at him, authentic in a way so few of their shared social circle are. "If there is anything I can do to help, Hannibal, you simply *must* let me know."

"I believe we have it handled for now," Hannibal informs her, and touches his fingertips lightly to the back of Ellen's hand both in recognition of her goodwill and as a sign for her to let go, "but I promise to let you know if that should change."

Chapter End Notes

Canapé: (sofa/couch) A small, prepared and usually decorative food, held in the fingers and often eaten in one bite: a *hors d'oeuvre*. As they are often served during cocktail hours, *canapés* tend to be salty or spicy in order to encourage people to drink more, and are traditionally made by layering savoury foods such as meat, fish, caviar, cheese, *foie gras*, purées and/or relish with savoury butters or pastes atop small slices of bread, toast, crackers or puff pastry. This layering gives *canapés* their name: the garnish sits atop the base like people sit on a sofa.

Thank you to new23 for advice and correction on the rules around kosher food.

No fictional turkeys were consumed in the making of this chapter:
Gochujang meatballs
Sweet potato salad with bacon
Pineapple-fennel salad with ginger-sesame dressing
Chargrilled pork leg with asparagus
Peppercorn mutton (one of Hannibal's recipes from the show)

compôte

Chapter Summary

Hannibal makes some decisions. Will slowly gets worse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday sees Hannibal running - almost - unfashionably late to the charity bruncheon he has bought a ticket for, slipping into the gathering barely ten minutes before the opening speeches. Will's dogs had decided to prove troublesome that morning, no doubt missing their master, with four of them refusing to heed Hannibal's summonses back inside after they had performed the necessary ablutions and had a good 20 minutes beside haring about the fields. One of the smaller hellions in particular, *Buster,* had caught sight of some kind of rodent amongst the grasses and shot off after the unidentified animal into the woods, forcing Hannibal to go after the dog - and pull the stubborn little thing, still wriggling determinedly, backwards out of the abandoned rabbit hole he had gotten himself stuck in amongst the tangled roots of an old tree.

Hannibal had had to return to his home after the trip to Wolf Trap to change into something *not* covered in muddy pawprints, but Buster had treated his return to the house, tucked ignominiously under one arm, as though it were a victory parade: hail, the conquering hero, he who chased the barbarians from the borders of the land. (Had he been less inconvenienced by the timing of Buster's little stunt, Hannibal would probably have been impressed by the Jack Russell terrier's positive attitude.)

And so the bruncheon, wearing outfit #2 of the day amidst winter baubles and glowing lights. Christmas at the beginning of December. The event is fundraising on behalf of a local youth club's winter meals program, which aims to provide every child attending the club at least one hot meal a day on those days its centre is open, no questions asked, as well as the fresh ingredients and instruction on how to prepare simple healthy meals on a low budget at home.

"You're just in time," an alpha woman at Hannibal's table stage-whispers as Hannibal slips into his assigned seat beside her, the glint of open mischief in her eye as she toasts him with her cocktail. "They won't serve anything but water during the speeches."

"Then I had best fortify myself quickly," Hannibal murmurs back to her in the same conspiratorial tone, already raising his hand to summon one of the nearby servers over to take his order. "What would you recommend?"

"Well, I feel it is my civic duty to inform you that the espresso martinis are terrible," says Hannibal's new companion, smiling - and laughing delightedly when Hannibal's gaze drops

immediately, and quite pointedly, to what is clearly, by the look and strong coffee scent of it, a glass of espresso martini in her hand. Another glass is already empty on the table in front of her. “Unfortunately I am in dire need of coffee this morning, and the espresso by itself here is even *worse.*”

Hannibal orders himself two clementine martinis, and thus makes the friendly acquaintance of one Ms. Gloria Ortiz, a CSR consultant for a conglomerate of businesses in the Baltimore Inner Harbour area. Apparently the youth club is the latest organisation to have been ‘adopted’ for charitable giving by the conglomerate, and Ms. Ortiz is - contractually - expected to wax lyrical about this at great length.

As Ms. Ortiz is a beautiful woman, many people are remarkably inclined to listen to her wax lyrical about anything she pleases to.

“I would be more cynical,” she confesses, fingertip dragging idly around the wet rim of her martini glass. One angelic note of the glass harp. “Feeding hungry kids - it’s some of the easiest PR in the world. But what do hungry children care about sincerity as long as they get fed?”

Neither sincerity nor insincerity will fill an empty belly like a bowl of broth will, but a smart child will taste it when they are being patronised, when they are aware they have been tokenised, when they are made to feel ashamed for requiring an act of charity. Unpalatable flavouring for the stew.

“Good can be done with bad intentions,” Hannibal says quietly, his words almost lost under the more cheerful chattering going on at their table, around the room. “As much as vice versa.”

“I suppose that the world would be a much more miserable place than it already is if we could only do good when our whole hearts are put into it. Very few people have hearts that good.” Ortiz’s finger pauses for a moment on the glass’ rim, too busy turning her own words over in her head. “Oh, there’s the cynicism.”

“It sounded more like a practical acknowledgement of the human condition,” says Hannibal, accepting the martinis the server has brought to him with a murmured *thank you* aside. “And, of course, it leaves you room to be pleasantly surprised on occasion.”

Ortiz smiles at him again, and Hannibal doesn’t miss the way the woman has turned towards him in her seat, the faint note of *interest* he can taste in the pheromones she has started to exude from her glands. Beneath the blockers she has applied that day, something of her alpha scent reminds Hannibal of coconut tiramisu, sweet and dark all at once. Her eyes are as bright and lively as her mind, and her hair, when she turns her head, gleams like molasses beneath the twinkling lights of the room.

It would be no hardship for Hannibal to take Ms. Ortiz up on her unspoken offer. To whisk the alpha woman away from this gathering early - so early in the day - and scandalise all their peers. Out of contrariness, if nothing else.

It hasn't escaped Hannibal that their hostess has technically placed him on a table of 'unavailables': besides Ortiz and himself, everyone else seated at their table is married, mated or both - and Ortiz is a female alpha, supposedly *undesirable* for a male beta. Vice versa as well, of course, and so neither of them have been offered anyone socially approved of to seduce or be seduced by.

There must not be anyone at this event that their hostess has them in mind to woo.

Hannibal mulls over the idea with a mouthful of his martini, the clementines sharp over the cold bite of vodka on his tongue.

...He has no interest in it. *Hm.*

"My group is funding a trip to the Meyerhoff Symphony Hall for the club later this month as well," Ortiz says absently, her eyes on the small parade of children that are being ushered to the front of the room to be a poignant backdrop for the opening speech: *this is what your money is for*. "A Christmas treat: tickets to see the *Cirque Nutcracker.* The Symphony Orchestra and a circus troupe are combining to do a performance of *The Nutcracker.* Something about making classical music more accessible to everyone."

"A worthy pursuit," Hannibal says gently - and politely angles himself away from the alpha as they both turn their attention to the front of the room, where their overeager hostess is tapping the mic, preparing herself to launch into the first speech of many before anyone can eat.

"I would strongly recommend that we pursue more natural methods of reducing stress and easing your mind as you sleep rather than medication," says Dr. Morgan-Moore, staunch in the face of Will's evident disgruntlement and dismay. *Unhappiness* perfumes the air around Will's hospital ward in a general mixed cloud of tiredness, disappointment, sickness and fever-sweat, a depressing scent that has made two nurses already start clucking at Will with sympathy the moment they caught wind of it. "With your encephalitis, we'd be looking at giving you benzodiazepines, and I would prefer not to prescribe them for you during your pregnancy unless it's totally necessary. The side-effects can be unpleasant, and I'm unsure if you could stomach them at the moment. We're already cutting back on the oral medications you *ought* to be taking as it is due to your severe nausea."

"We tried the nice soothing drinks and no blue light already," Will complains from his seat on the bed, frustrated and aching, "and I'm still not getting enough sleep. I *still* ended up halfway down the corridor when I eventually *did* fall asleep." A nurse escort back to bed is becoming old hat by now. "You think, what, *aromatherapy* is going to cure all my stress from that? From *encephalitis?"*

He's being unfair; Dr. Morgan-Moore's logic is sound. Will *doesn't care.*

"We could arrange you an appointment with a masseuse," Dr. Morgan-Moore suggests, the tone of her voice implying she believes - quite correctly - that this is another idea Will is going to shoot down. She's quite astute, and carries on without missing a beat when Will shakes his head at her. "Have you considered nesting, Mstr. Graham? People of all genders and dynamics find the act of building a nest to be a soothing one, even outside of heat and rut cycles, and choosing to sleep in an enclosed nest has been proven to reduce stress levels almost universally."

Nesting *is* soothing. Defending a nest from judgement and attack, however, is not. "I… I'm not comfortable with the thought of building a nest here."

"Do you feel unsafe here?" Dr. Morgan-Moore asks with a concerned frown. Leaping to - well-intentioned - conclusions. "Has a member of staff made you feel unsafe?"

Will rubs at his bare arms, cold again. He's always cold now. "It's just. Not home."

Somewhere doesn't have to be dangerous or unfriendly to just not be comfortable. Some people just won't shit in a public bathroom, for all kinds of reasons. Will, for his own complicated snarl of reasons that even he's struggling to tease out, doesn't want to nest outside his own home.

(The only place safe is *home.*)

Vague understanding shifts through Dr. Morgan-Moore's eyes, the kinship of omegas, but her medical training pushes through. "I understand, but if you could at least *attempt* to build a nest, you might be surprised by its benefits."

A sad little arrangement of blankets and pillows that smell of nothing but Will and whatever fabric soap the hospital uses is not going to comfort Will's mind in his sleep and magically change his life. And the scent of Wolf Trap, of Will and the dogs and the wilds outside their home, has mostly faded from the duvet and blanket that Hannibal had brought for Will the previous week.

Will shakes his head again, and tucks that ache up behind his breastbone.

His OB-GYN sighs at him. "Would you like to try the masseuse?"

"I've got enough strangers putting their hands on me for the moment. Thank you, doctor." A flicker of movement near the open doorway draws Will's attention immediately, his mood lightening a little at the sight of the man standing there. The ever-present thermal bag over the man's shoulder. "Hannibal."

"I apologise," says Hannibal politely, with a nod to Dr. Morgan-Moore, "am I interrupting?"

The - other - doctor shakes her head, stepping back from Will's bed. "No, I think we're finished for now." It's been a long day for both of them. "Mstr. Graham, if you could please consider my suggestion?"

When Will doesn't answer her either way Dr. Morgan-Moore takes her leave, nodding her head courteously to Hannibal as she passes him. (What *must* they whisper about Hannibal in the Noble Hills break room?) Hannibal moves closer to replace her presence at the foot of Will's bed, and Will tilts his head back to regard the beta suspiciously.

"...How long were you standing there?"

"Long enough to hear one of your doctors tell you to do exactly what I suggested you do on Thanksgiving," says Hannibal, his expression remaining placid even at Will's immediate chirrup of disgust in reply.

"I told you so, Dr. Lecter, really? How puerile."

"Encephalitis or not, they say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Something has to give, Will."

As though Will doesn't *know* that. "Do you think I'm avoiding restful sleep on *purpose?"*

Will had spent his morning doing all manner of ridiculous spatial awareness tests for Sutcliffe after agreeing - with some caveats - to Sutcliffe's study: reading aloud from books, drawing clocks and lines, and having bright lights shone repeatedly into his eyes. All whilst Sutcliffe had continued to talk to Will like Will was only as smart as your average preschooler. When pens and fingers had started to be waved in front of Will's face like Sutcliffe was auditioning to star in a third-rate hypnotist's show Will had reached the end of his patience for being a dancing monkey that day, and brought the finger-waving to a halt by blandly suggesting that, even if the encephalitis was affecting Will's eyesight, Will could always find the next digit carelessly waved in his direction by biting it.

The end result had been a note on Will's chart about his 'occasional but noted displays of aggression towards symbols of authority', and Sutcliffe rather snidely announcing that Will's hemispatial neglect appears to be getting *worse* rather than better.

"It's hard to lie still and fear going to sleep when it is sleep itself giving you so much to think about," says Hannibal. "You listen to your breathing in the dark and the tiny clicks of your blinking eyes."

Will sighs, blowing out some of the worry and the irritation that has gathered itself in a cold tight ball in his chest. "I dream more now than I used to."

Will dreams more now than he used to and he dreams more vividly. His life… it feels like everything he has experienced since the Minnesota Shrike case has deepened his dreams' depth and colours, the blood and pheromones and screams of the fresh crime scenes soaking in through his pores and sending his nightmares racing down the hole to Wonderland after a murderous white rabbit. The Shrike's victims have been in Will's *bed* as he sleeps at night, real enough to touch, to bleed out on Will's sheets and hang like spiked birds over his horrified face. Whispering mushrooms grow from his fingertips. In a field of silk and flowers, a monster with no face cracks open Will's ribcage to tenderly feed Will chunks of his own bloody lungs.

The spectre of Garret Jacob Hobbs himself is still hovering over Will like a funeral shroud, his body burnt into Will's retinas at its moment of passing like an optographic image in reverse. If they dissect Will's eyeballs they'll find Hobbs printed upside-down on the inside, lips still bared in a smiling hiss. *See?*

"Your dreams were the one place you could be physically safe relinquishing control," Hannibal says, and it is the *understanding* there that hurts the most when it hits Will, a knife sliding between his ribs and twisting high. "Not any more."

Will's eyes sting, and he has to look away from the compassion in Hannibal's eyes before he does something stupid. Stupider. *Hell.* "I thought about asking them for a sleeping bag to zip myself up in before I go to sleep, but it sounds too much like a poor man's straightjacket."

At the corner of Will's - increasingly limited - vision, Hannibal shifts. Makes a sound that could be sympathy. Could be dismay. He reaches out to Will with one hand - and Will stiffens.

The hand drops. "...On that note, I've brought you a belated Thanksgiving gift. It's not a sleeping bag, but it is something to sleep in."

The sound of a zipper, and then a soft squishy package wrapped in blue foil paper lands on the bed by Will's feet. It gleams enticingly, a friendlier prospect than the thought of continuing the conversation as is.

Inside lies a new set of flannel pyjamas, bottoms and buttoned top: navy blue, subtly striped. Will's size.

"The nights are growing colder," Hannibal explains as Will clutches the gift to his chest, confused, "and I thought you might appreciate some variety in your sleepwear since it is what you prefer to greet your visitors in at the moment."

"...I didn't get you anything," says Will. People don't usually exchange gifts at Thanksgiving, do they?

"I wasn't expecting you to," says Hannibal. Will bristles until the beta adds, "I give you things because it pleases me to do so, Will. Because I can, and because I wish to see you content. Not because I expect - or even desire - a return."

"I-" Will can feel his cheeks burning, the heat spreading to his ears and down his throat. He makes himself laugh, a little awkwardly, trying to make light of it as he swings his feet off the bed and onto the floor. "We probably should have had the kink-talk *before* making a baby."

Hannibal meets Will as he stands, so close Will can do nothing but breathe in the silver spice of Hannibal's cologne. "Better late than never, as they say." The heat and scent of him has gone straight to Will's head, Will's cock - and is *not* helped by Hannibal dipping down so his hot breath fans over the shell of Will's ear. "Do you like it when I buy you nice things, Will?"

Will shudders, something in his belly doing a hot confused swoop of mingled arousal and shame. “I didn’t mean-”

“I could buy you diamonds,” Hannibal offers almost conversationally, the tip of his nose dragging over Will’s temple, “if you’d like them. Long cool strings of pearls to drape across your fevered skin. Silks and velvets to roll around in all day.” More teasingly: “A cherubic little servant-boy to hand-feed you grapes when I’m away.”

Will’s next involuntary shudder is one of laughter, and he pushes back lightly against Hannibal’s chest with flat palms. A few more inches, so he can smile up into the other man’s face. “What about when he has to go to school?”

Hannibal’s eyes are gleaming again, the wicked crinkle of crow’s feet at their corners that Will only ever sees when Hannibal is laughing as well. “Ah, labour laws. I suppose I could hire someone to train a monkey.”

“Why would I ever want you to come back if I’ve got a trained monkey?” Will asks, and laughs again at the vaguely martyred expression that earns him. Plucking at the nearby strap of Hannibal’s thermal bag: “Feed me, Seymour.”

Tonight’s dinner is miso broth with shrimp dumplings, served with a bowl of wild rice, and sliced fruits and cheeses to finish. It’s light but filling, and Will spends a few long minutes at a time chasing errant dumplings around his bowl with the wide flat well of his spoon.

After he has captured his second and popped it into his mouth, Will glances up, making an inquiring sound when he catches Hannibal’s eyes on him across the table. Looking pensive rather than prideful for a change, like he has something he wants to say.

Hannibal purses his lips for a moment, but takes the dive. “I’m afraid there is no delicate way to ask this. Will, would you have any objection to me kennelling your dogs?”

Surprised, Will swallows a little too quickly; the shrimp in his dumpling slides down his throat in a slow thick lump. Blocking his speech.

“I had expected to last a little longer than this,” Hannibal goes on, “but it seems that I overestimated myself when I offered to take on the care of your pack. My home is currently unsuitable to house seven dogs, and, whilst I *do* have renovations planned that would mean I should eventually be able to better accommodate them, those renovations are still some way off. Many contractors are taking their vacations as the end of the year draws apace, and the time I would usually have available in my days to contact them is currently being used travelling to and from Wolf Trap.”

“You-” Will coughs thickly, clearing his throat before trying again, “you’ve been going to see my dogs in Wolf Trap morning and night for the past several days?”

“Yes, of course,” says Hannibal, like that’s nothing, looking vaguely wounded at the thought Will might assume he’d been doing anything else.

“Aside from visiting me in hospital, you’ve been spending *four hours of your day, every day,* for the past *several* days, driving to and from Wolf Trap?”

“What did you think I was doing?” Hannibal asks, and *Christ,* the man actually sounds *perplexed.*

Will is aghast. “I didn’t- *God,* I never really thought about it in detail; I was just grateful my dogs were being looked after.” Will has had *other things on his mind.* But that’s- with the travelling and the feeding and the pee breaks and the cooking food and *all the time Hannibal has been with Will in the hospital,* that’s-

That’s *so many hours.* How has Hannibal found so many hours in the day? Does he *sleep?!*

“Kennel them,” says Will, because he *cannot* say *I will never be able to repay you for this.* “*Jesus,* Hannibal. Kennel them. *Please.* I can get you the number of the place I usually use, and- uh, I’ll write you a note to hand over when you check them in. Stuff for the kennels to watch out for.”

Ellie has to have her favourite bed with her when she goes in or she’ll get scared and pee on the floor at night, and Winston has never been kennelled before. Buster despises cats.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do more,” says Hannibal, and Will *has* to stare at him.

“When you’ve done so much? Don’t be sorry.” Will cannot handle Hannibal being humble at the moment, whether it’s authentic humility or not. Will has too much swelling up inside of him to deal with the long stretching shadows that grow in him by the light of another’s virtues. “I- uh, I owe you all my thanks.”

Night. Will reads Robert Frost’s poetry in the dim quiet of his bedside lamp, half folded over his book. *One luminary clock against the sky/ Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right* - though perhaps Will’s doctors might disagree with the sentiment. It isn’t strange to be awake this side of midnight, though many - including Will himself - might prefer that Will were sleeping instead. But sleep won’t come.

(I have been one acquainted with the night.)

Distantly, from somewhere outside of Will’s hospital ward, there is a thin pitiful cry.

Will pauses in his reading, and lifts his head from his book. Outside of the times he has been wheeled to diagnostic exams, Will hasn’t heard - or seen - any other patients in his time at Noble Hills, let alone ones that might cry like *that* during the night. Or have babies with them

to cry during the night. Less muffled weeping, and more the simple wail of a small thing in pain.

Rich people don't like to be disturbed by another person's suffering.

The cry comes again as Will listens, a high thready whine that trails off into a whimper. Animal-like. Canine? Just as distant as before, but louder. More desperate.

Will slides out of bed.

Tancred is the only one at the nurse's station in the corridor outside Will's suite of rooms. He smiles when he sees Will approaching him, looking up from the phone in his hands. "Mstr. Graham."

"Did you hear that?" Will asks him, but Tancred only looks at him blankly. "It sounded like a dog."

Tancred shakes his head. "Dogs aren't allowed in the hospital."

"Doesn't have to have been a dog to *sound* like a dog," Will says, growing more exasperated when Tancred just shakes his head again. "You didn't hear anything at all?"

"Nothing. It's been a quiet night so far, Mstr. Graham."

Standing in the corridor, *Will* can't hear anything now either. The cry has stopped.

Will sighs through his nose, an aggrieved little snort of air. "It must've been coming through the windows."

"...Maybe," Tancred says dubiously, which is better than him - or either of them - mentioning just how high up the floor they are on is, and just how unlikely it is for Will to have heard an animal at ground-level all the way up here. With the - insulated - windows *closed.*

Confused and more than a little annoyed at himself, Will returns to his ward, his bed and his poetry. The crying does not come back. Sleep, however, does - eventually, Will dozing off over his book near dawn.

The kennels Will prefers for his dogs are full. Too full for a pack of seven for an indeterminate length of time during the winter holidays anyway, which is full enough.

Hannibal sighs as he hangs up from his phonecall with the kennels, resigning himself to a great deal of research on suitable kennelling facilities in the nearby Maryland-Virginia area before another night of driving to Wolf Trap from Baltimore and then back again. Caring for

some dogs in between. And then doing it all over again first thing in the morning, before the sunrise has even warmed the roads.

The dogs are still pining for Will. They perk up when they see Hannibal now, knowing he'll bring them sausages and will soon be filling their food bowls, but their ears still droop and the littlest among them still whine when no Will enters into the house on Hannibal's heels. They crowd close around Hannibal on those evenings Hannibal goes to them after visiting Will in hospital - and of course they do, because Hannibal carries the fresh scent of their beloved master on his clothes.

Winston and Hannibal have come to a grudging understanding - borne of necessity - in Will's absence. The dog will tolerate Hannibal's presence in his home, eat the food Hannibal prepares and willingly leave Hannibal alone in the house whilst the pack go outside to relieve themselves - but Hannibal is still left with the distinct impression that Winston still has Hannibal on thin ice, so to speak, constantly keeping track of Hannibal's movements around Will's property with his dark, remarkably astute, canine eyes.

It's remarkable. Animals really are more intelligent than most human beings.

...Even including Buster, who gets himself unrepentantly stuck down the same rabbit hole as the day before, in that ratio.

Will laughs himself into startled hiccups when Hannibal recounts Buster's exploits to him at lunchtime over bowls of hot Thai pumpkin curry made with the last of Hannibal's salmon and shrimp. Each little laughing jump of Will's diaphragm is the peal of Sunday bells in the hospital ward, a little dusty from disuse, a band-aid against the *look* Hannibal's dry-cleaners are going to give him for turning over another set of clothing covered in grubby pawprints to be washed.

"That explains a lot," a tired, pale but currently pink-cheeked Will says when he has finished laughing, when Hannibal has finished detailing his many struggles in getting a wriggling and *thoroughly* muddy terrier into a bath and out again without serious injury to man, dog, or Hannibal's grey Italian cashmere crewneck.

His spoon already set down, it is nothing for Will to reach over the table between them and set his hand fondly to Hannibal's cheek - thumbing away a dried-on clump of mud Hannibal actually hadn't noticed he still had there. No doubt, courtesy of Buster.

Hannibal *sighs* and Will laughs again hoarsely, teasing, "Who knew all it took to get the esteemed Dr. Hannibal Lecter a little dirty was one very determined little dog?"

Buster is rapidly surpassing the classification of *dog* and evolving into the more salubrious term of *filthy, impetuous little hellbeast.*

Hannibal turns his face into the hand against his jaw, dragging his nose down over the heel of Will's palm and against the - still - sweetly-scented tender skin of Will's inner wrist. Looking up just as teasingly at Will from under lowered eyelashes and drawling, "If you wish to get me *dirty*, Will, I can suggest a few ways that would be more fun for the both of us than giving one of your dogs a bath."

The image of Will splattered with blood springs to mind, soaked up to his forearms with crimson like he had been that day in the Hobbs' kitchen. *Unlike* that day, however, the Will that Hannibal can now see in his mind's eye isn't hiding away behind his bloodied glasses after killing a man, trembling in the aftermath of shock. No, *this* Will is a wild, sleek thing, golden-eyed and revelling in his own power. No barriers hide his gaze or his judgement from the world, and behind him stretches a carnage too beautiful to describe.

"You severely underestimate how fun I'd find just pushing you into a river," Will says, and grins until his grin is split by a bottomless yawn.

He's in worse condition than how Hannibal had left him the day before. Will had been asleep, yes, when Hannibal had arrived, but sweat-soaked and twisting fitfully on his bed. He had startled awake when Hannibal had touched his arm, and hadn't even seemed to realise his omega claws had embedded themselves in a death-grip on Hannibal's forearm. An instinctive defence.

Whilst Will had been in the bathroom cleaning up, Hannibal had wiped away the blood dribbling sluggishly down his wrist.

As the conversation peters off again, Will wears visibly thin. Paler and thinner than he should be and with heavy bags under his eyes, his grip is weak around the handle of his spoon, each bite of his curry slower and more carefully precise than the last. Too tired to be hungry, and - partially - so tired because he hasn't had enough lately to eat.

"Will, you're going to fall asleep in your bowl," Hannibal says gently, leaning forwards when Will's spoon touches down in the curry again and hesitates there. "Perhaps a nap might be a good idea?"

Will doesn't argue. Will's lack of argument is troubling. His forehead burns like a furnace under Hannibal's hand when Hannibal tucks him into bed.

Hannibal reads an English translation of Yukio Mishima's *The Sound of Waves* aloud as Will drifts in and out of consciousness on the bed beside his seat. The narrative is a simple one for a listener to grasp even if they should miss half the story, love and lies and a deep fondness for the sea, and Will seems to draw comfort, in those moments he wakes, at stirring and still finding Hannibal beside him, reading.

Whilst Will is sleeping, between chapters, Hannibal takes a look at Will's medical chart as well.

Donald has significantly upped Will's dosage of corticosteroids. Whilst Will has been showing some signs of improvement, his temperature lowered and his behaviour closest to normal whilst the steroids are being directly fed into his bloodstream and immediately afterwards, the improvement is not lasting or satisfactory enough. Will's overall health, as Hannibal had thought it might be, is actually worsening. Will is sleeping less, sleepwalking more, his fevers climbing higher as he stares into space, complaining of his headaches. His hemispatial neglect has worsened to the point where his nurses are being advised to watch for signs of Will stumbling whilst recognisably conscious or walking into doorframes.

The plasmapheresis Will had undergone that morning had removed a great deal of the autoantibodies in Will's system that are making Will sick - but Will's immune system, in absolute defiance of the steroids trying to suppress it, is simply continuing to make more.

It seems Will Graham's greatest fight is always against himself.

The next time Will wakes he asks for his work bag - and the laptop in it -, still in his car parked outside of Hannibal's house. Hannibal frowns at him, still seated, leaning in over Will's pillow so he can brush dark sweat-soaked curls off of Will's forehead before they can fall into his eyes. "Are you dreaming of old cases?"

"I don't want to write any more emails on my phone," Will says, avoiding both the question and Hannibal's gaze by closing his eyes again.

That evening, Hannibal makes arrangements with one of Baltimore's top-rated luxury pet lodges to take in and thoroughly spoil Will's motley pack of seven. With the hefty up-front fee Hannibal is paying them beforehand, the lodge's staff are *more* than happy to come and pick up all the dogs and any of their personal essentials the following morning from Wolf Trap, rhapsodising over the phone about just how happy all of Dr. Lecter's 'little darlings' will be.

When Hannibal finally ends the call, having agreed to meet the lodge's staff for the pick-up at 7.30am the following day, the silence in its aftermath is ringing. Hannibal switches on his music system to begin preparing dinner, but even the sweeping virtuosity of Bach's *Harpsichord Concerto in D Minor* fails to chase out the silence at the corners of his home. The quiet lurks like a defiant stray, hovering at the edges of Hannibal's hearing whichever way he turns his head. It brings a flat end to the concerto's grand swooping notes, digging dirty claws under the veneer of Hannibal's pleasure and *scrabbling* until Hannibal switches off the burners of his stovetop with a sigh.

Hannibal goes to Wolf Trap early that night, and the dogs get the last of the sausage that had been in his fridge.

Monday, 7.30am. Wolf Trap. Though they are clearly more accustomed to handling dogs with finer pedigrees than Will's pack of strays, the staff of Baltimore's *Barks & Bones* Pet Lodge are the perfect image of friendly professionalism as Hannibal introduces them to Will's dogs one by one, assisting the pick-up team by handing them a bag filled with the dogs' personal belongings - leashes, beds, toys, medications - along with a copy of the instructions Will had left him on their personal quirks and requirements. The instructions are verbally reiterated. Forms are signed.

Both Jack-the-dog and Zoe start barking when the cage door closes behind them on the *Barks & Bones* transport, Jack's deep resonant barks and Zoe's higher yips piercing the thin mist that is clinging to the flat fields around Wolf Trap that morning. Buster yaps only until he has Hannibal's attention, and then huffs very pointedly and turns around to show Hannibal his back.

"Be good," Hannibal tells the ridiculous little terrier - before finding Winston's dark eyes behind the other dogs in the back of the van. "Keep him away from rabbit holes. And cashmere."

Winston huffs at Hannibal as well for that, no doubt already understanding the impossibility of the task that Hannibal has set him.

Hannibal really is going to have to renovate his own house - and in ways he would have never thought about doing so only months before. The dogs are Will's family, and go - with some obvious exceptions - where Will goes. And Will...

Will Graham has made himself a more long-lasting fixture of Hannibal's life than even Hannibal had initially predicted he might. From his first meeting with Will, the wild, beautiful, *rude* omega with a brilliant mind and dazzling soul, Hannibal had *known* in the core of himself that Will Graham would impact his life somehow, a landmark to be noted on Hannibal's journey through existence, because it is in the nature of disasters to devastate and stars to burn.

Hannibal has weathered such chaos before: the disasters had all subsided in the end, and the stars had all burnt themselves out in the skies they hung in. Before meeting him, *knowing* him, how could Hannibal have known that Will Graham would not just be another of the same?

There may be nothing in the universe exactly like Will Graham, and, in that uniqueness, he and Hannibal are the same.

Right now, Will Graham is too precious to die, so he must live. And, because he lives, he must, inevitably, be a part of the life of his and Hannibal's child. Will is not the kind of man who will accept anything less, and it pleases Hannibal that their child will know their remarkable mother.

There will be no stepfather, no alpha for Hannibal to hand Will off to as Hannibal had originally intended. Will cannot be allowed to take a mate or spouse: no-one to challenge Hannibal's custody of their child, no-one to challenge Hannibal's authority over their child.

No-one to turn Will's head away from the family that *Hannibal* has already made for him. Them.

The thought is intolerable.

Will's scent, Will's smile, the way Will's cheek squishes up against his arm or pillow when he is sleeping. The way Will drawls *doctor* or *Hannibal,* the fine fleshy blade of Will's tongue. Will's theories, quietly spoken as secrets are, the bright flame of intelligence burning

gold and blue in Will's eyes. Callused fingers folded around a fork, a spoon, a knife, a gun. The flash of white fangs. All of it, all of Will: a catalogue of gluttony, something that Hannibal has gorged himself upon again and again and yet is still waiting to grow full from, to become sick of through overconsumption.

No limit has yet declared itself. There is no satiation to be found, it seems, except in the very act of consumption, and so the consumption must be constant. Endless.

God-made-flesh bears his breast and bloody side: *Taste and see that the Lord is good.*

Will must be contained. Will must be accessible. Death is undesirable. Imprisonment of both the legal and illegal variety will be complicated and may only prompt Will into doing something that will cause trouble for himself, both of them, or everyone.

Through the morning mist around Wolf Trap, the simplest solution sounds clear and bright, like the clanging of a buoy anchored out at sea. *Understanding* spilling like the sunrise, through the clouds and over the fields.

"It's beautiful out here," one of the *Barks & Bones* staff members breathes, caught by the beauty of the dawn's slanting rays over the dew-soaked grass. Even the dogs have fallen quiet.

"It is," Hannibal agrees, and smiles to himself at the scene. Contented peace sings the Angelus in his soul.

Hannibal had already been resolved to support and see Will Graham's flourishing into his truest and most liberated self. Now… now, Hannibal is determined to be at Will's side as Will does so. To be at Will's side in all things.

Hannibal is going to marry Will Graham, mate Will Graham, or both. And then keep him.

Another line of tubing stretches out of the bruised crook of Will's elbow. After approximately a ruler's length of snaking down his forearm it splits into two lines, both trailing back behind and beside him to the nearby plasmapheresis machine. A noisy thing - it looks like it was humped out of the 60s, made to be part of the background set on *Star Trek.* An early optimistic dream of sci-fi, now spinning Will's blood around inside of it, separating the autoantibodies attacking his brain from his bloodstream.

It's loud. Will's head hurts. When he half-closes his eyes to try and slip away from this moment his lashes turn into spiked antlers, pushing themselves up out of Will's pale bare skin. Branching and branching again, each wickedly tipped point curled in around him like a

deadly ribcage. Blood streams down his arms from his wounds, the antlers still wet with red when Will reaches out with his fingertips to touch them.

“Mstr. Graham?” The technician.

Will blinks - and the antlers are gone. His hand is outstretched to nothing.

“Can I get you something?” asks the hovering technician, looking puzzled when Will just stares at him blankly. “A drink of water? A snack?”

The plasmapheresis machine is still whirring away.

Will lowers his hand. “...I am a bit thirsty,” he admits carefully, offering a reasonable excuse for his strange expression, strange actions. “Thanks.”

Quantico. The hall for Hannibal’s lecture on Alana’s behalf is packed, a mingled mass of FBI trainees, staff and fully-fledged agents all gathered to hear Dr. Lecter speak on the presentation and role of psychopathic features and developmental risk factors in trajectories of criminal behaviour, with a particular focus on the developmental precursors to murder, serial murder, and serious violent crime.

Alana, of course, had leant heavily on her specialisation for this lecture, exploring the ramifications of unaddressed family trauma on a developing one-day criminal’s psyche. Hannibal’s area of expertise focuses more on those trigger moments that tip a potential offender over the edge into becoming a killer, and how *not* to push someone over that edge.

The true crime enthusiasts in the audience are agog.

“What creates a killer,” Hannibal asks the room at large, his opening, “and, concurrently, how do we prevent a killer from being created?”

Clive Ericson is sitting in the audience, listening attentively. He knows Hannibal has seen him; their eyes meet deliberately, once, as Hannibal is taking questions and congratulations at the podium after the lecture has ended. Ericson holds the connection, searching for something in Hannibal’s face across the crowds of people between them - before doing the sensible thing and bowing out of the unspoken contest entirely, nodding his head once to Hannibal in recognition, then turning and walking away.

Hannibal will have to get his business card another time.

Noble Hills, mid-evening. Will is weary and wan, fretful and feverish. Everything irritates him - including himself -, and he sits on his bed in a tangle of folded limbs and thunderously cranky scowl, watching as Hannibal plates their dinner on his wheelable bed-table.

“I don’t know why you bother. I can’t keep anything down for longer than 10 minutes.”

“You’re tired,” Hannibal says as soothingly as possible, continuing to arrange their food.

“I’m tired and I can’t keep anything down for longer than 10 minutes,” says Will, bringing his knees up a little closer to his chest. “Why are you tormenting me?”

“You’ve managed to keep down the other meals I gave you.”

Will grumbles in the back of his throat. “I’m *tired,* Hannibal. I don’t want to vomit any more. I can’t bear it. My middle hurts.”

Hannibal eyes him carefully - but Will’s body language still indicates tired petulance more than active pain. He wheels over the table to Will’s bedside. “Your nausea will not improve if you are hungry.”

A very deliberate *ugh* from Will, so childishly melodramatic Hannibal cannot help but smile at it. “The entire human digestive system is the universe’s greatest argument against Intelligent Design.”

“I will allow that it’s a worthy contender,” says Hannibal, and, with another eye on the splotchy flush in Will’s otherwise pallid cheeks, leaves to fetch a damp facecloth from Will’s bathroom. Returning to wipe down Will’s face and collarbones, the back of Will’s neck, cooling and cleaning the sweaty hot skin beneath.

Will sighs as the cloth passes over his forehead and eyes, tilting his face up into it. Small pleasures. “That’s good.”

“The little things can make all the difference.” The facecloth is put aside, and the surface of the bed-table is pulled over the bed so it is in front of Will and Hannibal can access it from the side. The food on it is still steaming faintly, the mouth-watering aromas of fruit and sugar and cooked meat wrapping like a blanket of comfort around the room. “Just a few bites, Will. Then I’ll allow you to rest.”

Hannibal wants Will to be in as sweet a temper as is currently possible with the omega’s poor health and lack of sleep, so their dinner that night is deliberately catered towards Will’s dynamically-encouraged sweet tooth. Apricot-glazed pork loin, already cut up into easily managed pieces, is served with pan-seared and roasted brussel sprouts and carrots in a sweet-smoky maple syrup glaze. Apricot nectar has been mixed with carbonated lemonade to drink, chilled maraschino cherries bobbing in their glasses.

Will still refuses to unfold, to let go of his grip on his own legs and pick up a fork. “I don’t want you to go. Uh-” he swallows, and his throat clicks. “Need you to go. I mean. Not when you’ve made all the effort to come here.”

“I can stay and read to you again, if you’d like,” Hannibal offers, pleased.

Will gives him a rather hesitant, highly dubious, side-eye. “...That can’t be too fun for you.”

“A dear friend of mine has repeatedly implied that I am tragically in love with the sound of my own voice.” Will snorts loudly - and then tries to look terribly apologetic about it. Amused, Hannibal only smiles at him. “Here.”

A quick reshuffle: Hannibal removes his jacket and rises from his chair, nudging aside the bed-table just enough that he can take a seat beside Will on the bed. Somewhat dominating the mattress, taking up all the space the hunched-up Will isn’t using - including partially *behind* Will, from the side, so that Will naturally falls back and into him with the heavier dip in the mattress.

“Uh,” says Will, his brow furrowing. Not sure what to make of this.

“You need to eat,” Hannibal tells him gently, and places his hand around Will’s back over Will’s hip, encouraging the omega with a light pull into leaning back against Hannibal’s arm, Hannibal’s chest. Offering Will a fork with his other hand.

Will doesn’t take the utensil, too distracted puzzling through Hannibal’s intentions, his head tilted back just enough that he can examine Hannibal’s face - so Hannibal spears a chunk of meat from the nearest plate onto the fork’s tines and raises it to Will’s mouth. *“Uh.* I don’t -” Some of the apricot glaze rubs off onto Will’s lips, and he instinctively licks them clean. “Hannibal. I can feed myself.”

“Feed yourself then,” says Hannibal reasonably. Will scowls at him and reaches up for the fork, but Hannibal refuses to relinquish it until Will admits total defeat, opening his mouth for Hannibal to feed him the morsel already right in front of it.

Will’s scowl intensifies, and he glowers as his teeth scrape along the fork’s tines, dragging the meat there onto his tongue. “It’s delicious,” he says. Muttered like he means *you bastard.*

Hannibal hides his smile against Will’s hair, greasy as it is from the day’s accumulated sweat, pressing his lips to Will’s temple. “Hopefully it’ll encourage your appetite.”

Hannibal surrenders his fork to Will’s insistence - but not his grip on Will’s hip, holding the other man gently but undeniably against his chest.

The heat Will is exuding is phenomenal, not wholly unlike what Will might be like *in* heat. The hCG and relaxin in Will’s system are creeping to their peak at this point in his pregnancy, relaxing Will’s blood vessels and increasing the flow of blood to his skin and other organs so that Will is flushed with his pregnancy as well as his fever. His scent, under the sweat, suffering and the fading sour notes of stomach acid, is still sweeter and doughier than normal; oestrogen and progesterone are hard at work trying to regulate the other hormones swirling in

Will's body, stimulating the growth of his milk ducts and strengthening Will's womb to support the little life growing inside of it.

When Will forks up a chunk of carrot to eat of his own volition Hannibal rewards him by dipping his head forwards to rub their cheeks together, mingling their scents as one and causing Will to half-laugh, half-purr as he swallows. "Koala," he accuses Hannibal teasingly, but the point of his nose, when he turns his head, is a playful nudge against Hannibal's jaw rather than the prelude to a headbutt. Then, "Eat something as well."

Hannibal obliges him and picks up his own fork, but stays pressed close enough to Will that he can feel the motions of Will's cheeks and jaw as Will masticates, grinding the food that Hannibal had hunted, gathered and then cooked for him between his teeth into a soft enough paste to swallow. Life and sustenance sliding down his oesophagus, into his stomach, to be broken down there further into much-needed nourishment for himself and their child.

It brings Hannibal pleasure to be able to provide for Will and their child in such a way, to feed Will when Will is hungry, to give Will pleasure as well whilst doing so. Those who have lost interest in food have lost interest in life, so to stimulate interest in one is to kindle an appetite, however small, in both.

The apricots, the sweet, tender meat, the syrupy glazes… Will slips in and out of purring as he eats, a little sleepy rumbling that vibrates through his back and into Hannibal's chest. He does it most when he misses or forgets Hannibal observing him, sitting cross-legged now to better reach his plate.

Barely remembering his own meal, Hannibal nuzzles into Will's hair. Filling his lungs with the scent of Will and this moment, salt and cardamom and maple syrup: a glaze for pan-fried salmon, perhaps, or a fragrant sticky cake made with saffron for an Indian-inspired twist.

Will doesn't clear his plate, but he manages to eat more than Hannibal had thought he might before he professes he is full. He has room to finish his drink, maraschino cherry and all, and then to accept the cup of 'Turkish Delight' tea that Hannibal offers to brew for him with a little hot water brought to them by the hospital staff - but the skinhunger in him is born anew when Hannibal releases his grip on Will, breaking the contact between their bodies and sliding off the bed. Leaning after Hannibal's body with his own.

Will touches Hannibal's hand rather than the mug Hannibal brings him, his fingers sliding traitorously, tellingly, beneath the buttoned cuff of Hannibal's shirt. A fluttering against Hannibal's pulse. "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it," Hannibal tells him with a kindly smile - and then ignores the thin whine that slips free from Will's throat when Hannibal sets the mug down on the table in front of him and moves away again. "I have a surprise for you."

"Oh?" Will's - thwarted, embarrassed - expression slides back into something close to grumpiness when he sees the laptop bag Hannibal produces for him. "My laptop isn't a *surprise,* Hannibal."

“It is what is *on* the laptop,” Hannibal informs him, handing Will the bag so he can begin clearing away their dinner plates. “Or will be, once you have logged in and you give me a moment to install it for you.”

Will narrows his eyes, but he boots up the laptop and types in his password - whilst Hannibal pretends that he is paying no attention whatsoever to the specific order of keys Will uses. The computer is turned back to Hannibal, and Hannibal navigates to the *Barks & Bones* website, inputting the code the pet lodge had given him. A few more clicks, and a shortcut icon is installed on Will’s desktop. This, once clicked, leads directly back to the website again - and a private livestream of one particular room at the pet lodge.

Will freezes as the audio loads, one very familiar officious little bark sounding through his laptop's speakers, answered by the *yip* of another. "Is that-?" Hannibal turns the laptop's screen back towards him, and Will's eyes immediately water at the sight of the livestream: a large, comfortable-looking kennel room, carpeted, strewn with familiar dog beds and toys.

In the foreground, Buster and Zoe seem to be playing tug-of-war with a pull-rope toy, whilst, to the side, Max is nudging his way through a dog-flap to leave the room.

“They can come and go as they please for most of the day,” Hannibal explains. “There's a shared fenced-in area for them to run in just outside of their private room, and the staff assured me the personal chef would do their best to follow the recipe you gave me for their meals.”

Will scrubs at his eyes with the back of his cannula-free hand. “This is not the kennel I usually use.”

“They were full. I thought you’d appreciate some of the perks the replacement I found offers.” The link to a camera in the dogs' room 24/7 most of all. “It has glowing reviews.”

Will reaches out to the laptop that Hannibal is still holding, his fingertips almost touching the screen and the image of his pack upon it. “This is live?”

"It is," Hannibal confirms, and then pulls the laptop away from him.

"Hannibal.”

Time to see if sweet food really might, long-term, sweeten Will's temper. “I can think of a more comfortable place to watch this, can’t you?”

“What do you -” Will breaks off mid-sentence, his beautiful blue eyes flying wide in instinctive outrage when Hannibal carries the laptop over to the ward's nesting area, whisking back the curtain there to take a - low - seat on the edge of its mattress. *“Hannibal.”*

“Are you coming?” Hannibal asks nonchalantly, blithely ignoring the warning grumble-snarl he can hear building like a thunderstorm in the chest of the omega in front of him.

Will is *vibrating* with his anger-indignation - but he still hasn't pushed himself up off his bed towards Hannibal. Waiting for Hannibal to explain or correct himself, because Will, at least

in part, trusts him. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Merely giving Will another timely nudge for Will's own sake, pushing Will by deliberately butting up against the taboo.

“Getting comfortable,” says Hannibal, idly wondering, if he leaves his seat to fetch his own mug of tea, if Will will block him from returning to it. The Turkish Delight blend is the same one Hannibal had brought with him to Minnesota - this time, of course, without diazepam for either of them -, and Hannibal has brought actual cubes of Turkish Delight, dipped in chocolate, to accompany it.

“Don’t play dumb.”

“This is the most comfortable spot in your ward.”

“It should be; it’s meant for *nesting*.” Will's lips peel back from his fangs like a knife slicing red flesh from wet bone and *there*, there is the snarl.

The burning scent of ozone stings Hannibal's nose, raw against the roof of his mouth. He tempts fate, and swallows lightning - “It’s not a nest though, is it? At least, not at the moment.”

Will's knuckles tighten into five points of whiteness on the edge of his bed-table and, for a moment, Hannibal is sure Will is going to pick something up - likely his mug full of hot tea - and throw it at him. The violence of the premonition flashes through Will’s eyes as gold fire - but then Will is moving instead, half-lunge, half-stumble from sitting folded up for too long, irate righteousness carrying him forwards until he all but falls down into a seat at Hannibal’s side, snatching the laptop from Hannibal’s hands.

Too tired to punch Hannibal - *alas* - , but, laptop cradled against his chest, he brings his knee up as a barrier between them, *pushing* with his foot and shinbone to destabilise Hannibal’s seat. “*Get out.*” Literally kicking Hannibal out of the area of such contention. “And get me more pillows.”

Hannibal raises his eyebrow.

Will glares at him.

Hannibal gets up - Will’s kick had hardly had the strength behind it to really shift Hannibal from anywhere he wanted to be - and goes to fetch the requested pillows from the nearby closet. And several new blankets. And his own discarded jacket.

Having moved deeper into the nesting cavity with the laptop, Will gives Hannibal the evil eye for the extraneous nesting materials, but he doesn’t make Hannibal take any of them back again or even slash the nesting area’s entrance curtains closed in Hannibal’s face.

Will’s nesting area at Noble Hills is practically another little room in itself, a large space made between two walls, a full-length window that can be curtained or closed off with a sliding panel depending upon the inhabitant(s)’s preferences, and the curtained-off entrance.

There are shelves and a plug socket along one wall for necessaries. The floor is formed from a large, soft, and deeply cupped mattress set atop a base that can be unlocked and wheeled out in case of emergencies, and it is the cup of the mattress that Will is filling now, layering the bottom with the hospital blankets and his own duvet from home. More blankets and pillows are woven simply around the side of the curve, something soft for Will to fall back on when he has completed his task.

Hannibal's jacket sits on the very edge of the nest, pointedly unused.

Will reclines in the centre of the new nest with all the brazen confidence of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* in the Uffizi. His skin is paler than hers and covered up with a t-shirt and pyjamas, but his stare at Hannibal is just as haughty, just as challenging, as if daring Hannibal to comment on his position or the scant amount of effort he had put into constructing the basic nest around him.

Some of the copies made after the original painting had given Venus dark and impetuous waves of hair rather than gold. Many had imagined Venus - or the Venus of their muse - as a courtesan or prostitute. A smaller handful had imagined Venus as an omega male, a sensuous shapeshifter deity who assumed the form of beauty kept in his artist's eye.

All of them with that same languid challenge, issued naked from Venus' mussed bedsheets. All of them, and Will now among them, with that same electric, erotic charge.

With the window half-panelled over as Will seems to prefer it, the nesting area - and the simple *nest* now within it - is dim, warm and inviting, the scent of Will building in the confined space from the duvet/blanket from Wolf Trap, from Will's presence there himself.

Hannibal, crouched on the floor outside of the nesting area, has to lick his suddenly dry lips. Giving Will an articulate look: *what now?*

Paying no mind to the laptop beside him for the moment, Will gives Hannibal the exact same raised eyebrow Hannibal gave him before. "Yes?"

Imperious thing. Hannibal is clearly not invited into his nest.

So Hannibal gets up. Fetches his still-warm tea and Will's, and passes Will both his mug and the entirety of the Turkish Delight chocolates. Resuming his seat on the floor beside the nest - outside, looking in -, where he quietly sips his tea.

Will still hasn't closed the curtain on him; there's a message in that.

Will goes back to watching the stream of his dogs in between eating the Turkish Delight, and Hannibal watches the stream by watching Will's reactions to it. Will smiles when some of the dogs do something ridiculous, and his eyes soften as the night wears on, as the pack grows tired, and more and more of them must be returning to their personal room and their beds to sleep. Occasional barks are replaced by canine snoring, and the tension bleeds out of Will with it. Seeming to forget Hannibal is there at all.

He nods off.

Hannibal waits five minutes. Ten. Will's eyes have drifted closed and his chest rises and falls with the easy, even breaths of slumber, giving no response to the reflected light of his laptop's screen on his face.

Fifteen minutes. Hannibal leans into the nest, taking great pains not to disturb anything he doesn't have to, and shifts the laptop so Will won't accidentally roll over onto it in his sleep. Retrieving the empty tea mug and food container from beside Will's head. Picking up his ignored jacket and draping its expanse over Will's sleeping torso, keeping Will warm against the night's chill and imbuing his own scent into Will's nest.

When Hannibal stands, he draws the curtains to the nesting area closed behind him, muffling the dogs' snores and obscuring Will from view.

The nurse on duty, Hillary, looks relieved when she walks into the ward to take Will's vitals and realises where her patient must be. Happy that Will is finally relaxing and getting some rest. Whispering to Hannibal for confirmation, she asks, "He's nesting?"

Hannibal nods, adding a murmured, "Asleep. Don't wake him." Will is likely to be wrathful when he wakes and discovers *where* he had fallen asleep.

Hillary, good woman, smiles at him and raises a conspiratorial finger to her lips. *Shhh.*

Chapter End Notes

Compôte: (mixture) traditionally, a dessert originating in mediaeval Europe, composed of whole or large pieces of fruit in sugar syrup. Whole fruits are cooked in water with sugar and spices, and are commonly seasoned with ingredients such as vanilla, citrus peel, cinnamon, cloves, ground almonds, grated coconut, candied fruit or raisins. The dish can be eaten hot or cold.
Mediaeval belief held that fruit cooked in sugar syrup balanced the effects of humidity on the body, and so, in late mediaeval England, the dish was often served at the beginning of the last course of a feast along with a creamy potage. During the Renaissance, it became more common for compôte to be served chilled at the end of dinner.
In modern French, a compôte usually refers to an unsweetened fruit purée without fruit chunks (such as applesauce).

One luminary clock against the sky/ Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right/ I have been one acquainted with the night. - Robert Frost, *Acquainted with the Night*
Taste and see that the Lord is good. - Psalm 34:8

Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. ~~Look, there's even a dog.~~

Miso broth with shrimp dumplings
Thai pumpkin curry with salmon and shrimp
Apricot glazed pork loin (one of Hannibal's recipes from the show)

île flottante

Chapter Summary

Alana returns from her trip. Will realises he's drifting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The delivery arrives at Hannibal's office between morning and afternoon appointments, two elegantly-wrapped boxes in a paper bag. The first and larger box is from a new high-end pâtisserie that Hannibal's society acquaintances have been gushing about lately, filled with a selection of beautiful pastries, whilst the smaller box is a mystery, wrapped and sealed in glossy black paper.

The card included in the bag states that the pastries are for Hannibal whilst the other box is for Hannibal's 'friend': *Some treats to assist in getting some R & R for you both. With sincerest affection, E. Komeda.*

A thoughtful gift. Hannibal calls Ellen to thank her for it, of course, at once.

"Should I inquire if Christmas has come early this year, or simply thank you for thinking of me?"

Ellen's laugh trills down the phone before she chides him playfully, "Now, Hannibal, I *know* you got my card." How else would he have known whom to call? "I hope I haven't overstepped?"

"Not at all; it's a charming surprise."

"Oh, *good.*" A soft breath of relief, and Hannibal knows without seeing her that Ellen has fanned herself dramatically then placed that delicate hand upon her chest. "I was passing by the pâtisserie the other day, you know, and just couldn't help myself. A few gifts for others, a great many more little gifts for myself and my houseguest at home - *oh,* I must have eaten my own weight in raspberry macarons yesterday. You must try the ones I ordered for you, Hannibal. They're scrumptious! Perfectly scrumptious."

Hannibal opens the box from the pâtisserie - and yes, there are three large raspberry macarons sitting inside along with several canelés, mokatines and wedges of chocolate framboisiers. All glisten surprisingly temptingly, beautifully fresh. "I shall sample them post-haste."

And, likely, share the remainder with Will. *Sweets to the sweet,* and sweet whipped cream to lick off Will's lips if Will doesn't succeed in biting off Hannibal's tongue with the tart

raspberries. (Because he *will* bite after yesterday, and Hannibal will thumb Will's scowl clean of blood and raspberry syrup regardless.)

"See that you do!" Ellen exclaims, both eager for Hannibal's enjoyment and pleased at her own success.

Whether Hannibal enjoys the food or not, Ellen will now be able to crow to their society acquaintances that it was *she* who finally, formally, introduced Hannibal to the new pâtisserie that they are all waiting for his esteemed opinion on. Is it fit - is it fashionable - enough for Maryland's up-and-coming would-be hosts and hostesses to serve the pâtisserie's goods at their dinner and garden parties?

"The other box is, of course, for your special someone. I would've had them put the name on the tag, but I'm afraid I don't know it. You've been very coy with details, Hannibal!" Hannibal only hums down the phone - still maddeningly reticent - so Ellen continues, sighing at him: "I hope chocolates are okay? They won't interfere with any medical diet or the like? Please do say if they might; I would rather exchange them for something your partner will be able to enjoy."

"You are most kind," Hannibal says, and takes pity. "Chocolates are more than acceptable; Will has something of a sweet tooth, and should appreciate them."

Ellen seizes upon her reward with all the voraciousness Hannibal expects of her. "*Will,* is it? And I suppose, should I pry, there will be no more details today other than that?"

"I shall be sure to introduce you both at the first possible opportunity," Hannibal promises her, and shortly thereafter finishes the call.

The deep berry pink of the raspberry macarons reminds Hannibal of Will's mouth, blushing between teeth. They cause the same sweetness to linger on the tongue, though it is acquired with a fluffy, slightly chewy bite through a delicate almond shell rather than incisors digging into living flesh. A pleasant snack with Hannibal's lunch.

Hannibal's afternoon appointments proceed in their usual mundane fashion, and, after seeing the last of his patients for the day out of the exit of his office, he finds himself sitting at his desk and writing up the last of his daily notes with some relief. Only an hour or so more and he will be at Noble Hills again - and, though Will may be vexed with him after Hannibal had antagonised him into nesting the day before, Hannibal will have deliverance from the accumulated boredom of his own day.

Someone knocks on the door of the patients' entrance.

It's late, and Hannibal is not expecting anyone. He rises to answer the knock regardless, of course, pleasure mingling with impatient dismay in his chest when he opens the door to find Alana Bloom standing in his waiting room. Wrapped up in her coat and a pretty red scarf, her cheeks pink with happiness, health, and the chill of December's air.

It is wonderful to see Alana again, naturally, and looking so well after her trip, but her smiling presence immediately denotes a delay to Hannibal's evening plans.

Alana dimples at the sight of him, something of the naughty child in her expression. Turning up uninvited - and in the full knowledge she is most likely to be indulged for doing so. She has been before. “Hi.”

Despite the hour, despite his plans, Hannibal is still too fond of his former protégée to turn her away. And she knows as much, prompting his wry: “Do you have an appointment?”

“Do you have a beer?” Alana asks in return, so Hannibal caves to this necessary setback with a smile, pushing open the office door wider to allow Alana inside.

Alana drops by Hannibal’s office often enough that he had thought ahead and placed some of the private reserve he had made for her in his office kitchenette’s small fridge. He brings her a bottle to where she has settled herself, coat removed, on his chaise lounge, allowing the brief *clink* of her bottle against his own glass of wine before he takes a seat beside her.

“I hope your holiday with your brother was a happy one?”

Alana smiles, the rim of the bottle pressed to her lower lip. “I had a lovely time. Got to see all my niblings again. They’ve shot up like weeds.”

“Bloom by name, bloom by nature,” says Hannibal, and Alana coughs, laughing as she swallows a mouthful of her drink at the same time.

Holding the beer aloft so none of it spills, she reaches one-handed into the handbag she had brought with her that day, digging out a large glass jar with light amber-gold contents. “A souvenir of my trip, as thanks for stepping in to cover my lecture.”

Hannibal sets down his wine on the floor by his feet before reaching out to take the jar - full of honey, it turns out, a handwritten label on the sticker on the side specifying that it is *blueberry* honey.

“One of my brother’s near neighbours has a blueberry farm,” Alana explains as Hannibal turns the jar in his hands, letting the lights of his office filter through its thick amber contents. Such even, beautiful colour. “They move the beehives in when the fields are in blossom.”

It seems today is a day for Hannibal to receive many delightful gifts. “My thanks,” he says sincerely. “Authentic blueberry honey can be one of the more difficult monoflorals to obtain.”

“I’m sure you’ll find something fantastic to do with it,” Alana says, “but it does taste lovely on its own.”

“I shall have to experiment,” Hannibal says, already running through a few recipes in his mind. Noting Alana’s smile beginning to fade: “The thought seems to trouble you.”

“Oh?” Alana had clearly been drifting away on her own thoughts, distant from Hannibal’s office and her company. She blinks back to herself at Hannibal's prompt, immediately contrite. “Oh, it’s- sorry, Hannibal. It’s not that. I just came back to a lot of unexpected work and it’s on my mind.”

Hannibal switches the honey jar in his hands over for his wine glass again, gesturing for Alana to continue.

“The FBI have asked me if I’d be willing to step up as a full-time substitute professor for Will’s classes. Temporarily, of course, but it’d be for the remainder of this cycle of trainees at least. Apparently Will’s taken an extended medical leave of absence.” Alana bites her lip, glancing at Hannibal worriedly beneath her lashes. She had brought the scent of the air outside in with her, her words hinting as delicately as the notes of her violet-anise perfume blossom from her skin - “Do you…?”

Do you know what’s wrong with him?

Hannibal politely closes that line of questioning, pointing to her sense of ethics. “That is a question you may feel better asking Will yourself, Alana.”

He has no desire to have Alana accompany him to the hospital that evening.

“Yes.” Alana closes her eyes, her worry still troubling her. Unable to let the topic rest because the topic is *suffering,* and Alana still cannot help but be drawn to the exhibition of a beautiful martyr. “But it wasn’t the cases, was it? I *told* Jack not to- I *told* him.” So determined to assist and protect.

“Alana,” Hannibal chides, and she sighs and gives in.

“I was going to drive out to Wolf Trap after this.”

“You may have better luck phoning or emailing him. Will is in the hospital.” Alana’s eyes fly open with fresh alarm. “He’ll be alright.”

“I was only gone a few days, and yet it might as well have been an aeon. At Port Haven too.”

“The ship missed the touch of its captain at the helm,” Hannibal says idly, swirling his wine before raising it to his mouth to sip. A California valdiguié, it has a low enough alcohol content it will not affect his ability to drive later, but it is still darkly sweet with the taste of black cherries. Alana *hm*s. “Interesting day with Abigail?”

“She was hoping some of her out-of-state extended family might call her on Thanksgiving.”

“But they didn’t.”

“But they didn’t,” Alana says. Sad. “Louise Hobbs’ relatives. They were never very close, apparently - low contact -, but no response at all from them after the news broke is pretty telling.”

“Another tie cut.”

Another door that Abigail Hobbs has discovered is now closed to her, shutting her outside the spheres of family, friendship and society she had once known.

“It’s all really setting in for Abigail now. The grief work, the trauma intervention…” Alana sighs again, obviously tired, her thumb rubbing back and forth over the condensation on her bottle. “It’s all on course. But I think she may be wrestling with a low-grade depression.”

Eyeing the large swig Alana takes of her beer, Hannibal inquires delicately, “*She?* ”

Alana’s returning smile is a rueful one. “Nothing wrong with a little self-medication, right, doctor?” Back to pensively thumbing the neck of her bottle - “Professional neutrality be damned, it’s hard to see such a bright, young girl go so adrift.”

It is. There are many more interesting things Abigail Hobbs could be doing with her life rather than being locked up in a psychiatric facility, too busy listening to the sheep in assigned group therapy bleating about their own victimhood to forge her own catharsis. A child of the woods and thorns, she will waste away if she spends too long fenced in by others’ banal good intentions.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal suggests, “it is time that Abigail is released from clinical treatment.”

Alana baulks. “Released *where?* Back into the wild?”

“Spending each day immersed in tragedy may be doing more harm than good. She should be out in the world finding her footing, giving her the confidence to move forward.”

Wet, bitter green notes rise under the sweeter smell of Alana’s perfume, the scent spreading as Alana’s loose hair sweeps past her throat - emphatically shaking her head. *Astounded* that Hannibal would suggest this idea to her. “Abigail is in no condition to tackle real-world issues like where she’s going to live, what to do about school, *hell,* where her next meal is going to come from.”

“I’m not suggesting abandonment,” Hannibal says, swift and placatory - and almost speaking over the end of Alana’s words.

Too astute for her own good at times, Alana narrows her eyes at him. *Assessing.* “You and Will both feel responsible but do you really think it’s wise to insert yourselves in Abigail’s life? Especially since Will is-” a hesitant beat - “sick?”

“I am qualified to help her,” Hannibal says. Reasonably. Once more gracefully skirting around the topic of Will and Will’s medical leave.

“You saved her life,” Alana acknowledges, equally as reasonably. (She really *had* been one of Hannibal’s brightest protégées.) “But it doesn’t change the fact that Abigail’s been through what she’s been through.”

“Was there when she went through it,” Hannibal points out, and Alana purses her lips at him.

“I can’t tell you what to do. But if you insist on taking a personal interest in her welfare, then you’d better understand, you can’t walk away, no matter what the outcome.”

“We break it, we buy it?” Hannibal recapitulates, seeking to soften his companion’s opinion with the lighter humour, his thigh pressed against hers on the chaise lounge.

Alana refuses to be diverted, pink rising in her cheeks with her fervour. “This is a girl who was very attached to her parents. Overly so, in fact. You stepping in as a surrogate would only be a crutch.”

In her own way, Alana cares, Hannibal absently realises, too much for Abigail. And is forcing herself to be overly, stringently professional with Abigail’s case to make up for that emotional attachment.

“Abigail needs to work things out for herself in a safe, clinical environment. *That* will give her the confidence to move forward.”

To insist further at this point would only push Alana into doing her best to keep Abigail distanced from Hannibal and Will in the interests of the ‘mental and emotional health’ of all three of them.

Hannibal concedes the - temporary - defeat, and bows his head. “I defer to the passion of my esteemed colleague.”

“Have soapbox, will travel.”

“Passion’s good,” says Hannibal, raising his wine to Alana in another toast. Alana’s care for and investment in the wellbeing of her patients is something that should be lauded - even when it brings difficulties to Hannibal’s own plans for the people involved. “Gets blood pumping.”

Slowly, still prettily flushed, Alana’s sincere smile returns to her. Her leg presses back against Hannibal’s when she leans into him, tipping her bottle of beer back against his glass to return his salute.

A breath of violets, anise and springtime rain. It complements the sweeter notes of Hannibal’s wine - and then is overpowered completely as he takes a sip of his drink and berries and black cherries burst, smooth, dark and wet, over his tongue. Too mild a flavour for competition.

Tuesday afternoon. The dog is whimpering again, on and on and on and on. Will can hear it even with his laptop closed - it is not one of *his* dogs -, the steady whimpering whine of an animal in significant pain.

Will dons his stupid monogrammed Noble Hills dressing gown along with his slippers before hurrying out of his ward in the direction the distressed noises are coming from, waving off the nurses at the desk in the corridor outside his rooms with a comment about needing some

fresh air. It's a believable excuse: there's a rooftop garden on one of the hospital's lower levels.

The whimpering rises and falls in volume as Will heads down the corridor, seeming to echo from below when Will sticks his head into the seemingly empty stairwell to listen intently. So Will takes the stairs down. Every now and then the whimpering breaks into a sharp whine and Will winces in sympathy - fresh pain, fresh suffering, like a dog pulling against the jaws of a trap it has accidentally wandered into and only making its bleeding worse. Has the poor animal gotten trapped in a trash or laundry chute? Stuck halfway up and halfway down, unable to move either way?

Will reaches the landing of the next floor down and - the whimpering stops. There is no whining, no scrabbling of claws, only the sudden ringing quiet.

Will hesitates. There are no chutes that he can see nearby, even stepping out into the nearby corridor. No locked ward rooms or places a loudly crying dog might be hiding and wouldn't be noticed.

"...Can I help you, sir?" asks a receptionist when Will wanders, bewildered and unnoticing, past her desk, and Will startles at the sound of her voice, spinning around.

"...Sir?" the young woman asks again, one eye on the hospital logo on the breast pocket of Wills dressing gown. Marking him as a patient.

Will licks his dry lips, hesitating again. "I -" His voice cracks, and he coughs before trying again. "Uh, it's the strangest thing, but. I thought I heard a dog?"

The receptionist stares at him. "There are no dogs in the hospital that I'm aware of, sir."

"No guide dogs? Therapy animals?"

"Certainly not on this floor," says the receptionist.

"...Right," says Will. With no idea what to do now, the hair prickling uncomfortably on his nape. "Thanks. It was probably just someone's TV." The receptionist gives him a dubious look. "Could you point me in the direction of the rooftop garden?"

Sky. Blink. Endless sky. Blink-blink. And lavender bushes, lavender, sprigs of lavender -

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The monster with only an overly-fanged mouth in its face feeds Will cake on the tips of its claws, blade-like fingers tucked delicately under Will's chin to lift his head for sweet desserts. Forbidden things that delight even as they turn Will's stomach with fear: tiny, sliced small, squares of sponge cake covered in coffee-flavoured buttercream and chopped hazelnuts. A canéle that bursts between Will's teeth, thick sweet rum-spiced custard flooding back over his tongue, down his chin, until a black clawed hand thumbs it away. Rectangles of a delicate chocolate and raspberry gâteau, chocolate cream and raspberry syrup sticky over Will's lips until a long, thick red tongue slides out of the monster's mouth to lap, lap, lap it all away, slipping slickly into Will's gasping mouth to lick the remnants from his teeth.

Melted syrup, cream and saliva dribbles down Will's chin, joining the blood pricked by claws trailing sluggishly down his throat, cold clammy sweat slick on his skin. He dares not move, mingled fright and arousal holding him in a deadly, ice-cold grip with the monster's fangs and claws. Held captive by a beast with the shape of a man but none of his colouring or proportions: too tall, too long, black as pitch and tough as old leather.

Strong arms and a hard, unforgiving torso pull Will in close and crush him up against the monster's chest, a sunken stomach beneath steel ribs. That long thick tongue plunders Will's mouth ruthlessly. Robbing him of air.

Will can't breathe.

Will can't breathe, can't get a breath in around his crushed ribcage and that tongue in his mouth, darkness all around him, darkness swarming *into* him - buzzing in his lungs in his belly in his ears - and he panics. Bites down. *Hard.*

Will's mouth fills with blood and spills over as the monster jerks away from him, hard, sharp fingers grabbing at Will's chest, forearms, to hold Will still as that endless bleeding mouth widens, widens, yawning open into a void of fangs and death.

Will refuses to be held down, pinned in place as that *maw* descends on him, struggling against the grip on his arms. One hand free is more than enough for Will to slash at his captor's not-face with his own omega claws, stumbling back, snarling, when the monster releases him in shock, one arm braced protectively across his abdomen.

"Will," says the monster, like the grinding of nails on a blackboard, the screech of bone against rock.

Will only snarls louder and takes another stagger-step back. Reeling. His mouth is still wet with blood and drool, watered down tar that spatters on the floor when he jerks away from another reach of the monster's too-long arm. More of the same tar is now embedded under his nails.

"Will," says the monster and- and backs up a step from him like it has finally understood he's not defenceless, one hand still outstretched. *Placating?* More words - *noise,* all of it an awful,

painful screeching, and Will winces and tucks his head against his own shoulder, trying to keep one eye on the threat and cover up one ear. “Will?”

More thick black blood drips onto the floor, and the monster makes another series of stuttering, screeching noises, one hand lifted to touch its own face. Over where its eye would be, if it had an eye.

Will stares, and the monster’s outline *blurs.* Another, familiar, image superimposed over black flesh as a mirage: two eyes and a long-fingered hand, ash-gold hair, an aquiline nose -

“Will,” the monster says clearly, gently, enunciated perfectly even as deadly fangs shrink and recede into a set of crooked teeth Will is more intimately familiar with. As the monstrous tar-black face shifts back into features Will almost knows, now, by touch alone, clothes blurring back into existence to cover the monster’s naked form. As though the teeth, the features, the clothes, had ever ceased to exist in the first place. “I believe you’re having an episode.”

Will’s stomach plummets into icy shock. “...Hannibal…?”

Having become so recently aware he needs to look for it, Hannibal is fascinated by the transformation effected in Will the moment Will truly slips back into his own skin. Between one blink of Will’s wounded gold eyes and the next, clarity brings an animation to Will’s features that Hannibal had noticed missing since he had arrived at Noble Hills that evening - an absence Hannibal had initially presumed, quite wrongfully as it now turns out, to simply be the semi-permanent weariness that weighs on Will’s bones as of late, the combination of a tiring pregnancy, ill health and poor sleep. Something of the meditative state that the suffering fall into when one they trust is caring for them, that omegas are particularly prone to when overwhelmed.

Higher reasoning sharpens the focus of Will’s gaze, a teardrop of blue blooming around the animal-black of his pupils. The soft colour weeps out into the gold fire that fear and snarling, defensive rage had made of Will’s irises - as it turns out, merely the first droplets of the storm to come. Reactive horror rims Will’s lashes with trembling moisture as he becomes aware of himself and his company again and realises exactly what he has done, taking note immediately of the matching tears of slow red that are sliding down one side of Hannibal’s face. The low-level *throb* that Hannibal must be feeling - *is* feeling - in his bitten tongue.

“Oh God, *Hannibal.*”

Will wears anguish beautifully, a tortured saint in living marble. The spirit of the divine is in his suffering: he beatifies himself, anointed by the blood he has drawn with his own teeth and claws, purified by the perfumed incense Hannibal has truly scented on him only once before, when Will trembled in the Hobbs’ kitchen over Abigail’s gushing throat. Will’s eyes are

uplifted not to heaven but to *Hannibal,* cast adrift by his own actions and searching for aid, for anchor. Iron and cordite, righteousness and panic. *Helpmehelpmehelpme. Yahweh, why have you forsaken me?*

(*Don't leave me alone.*)

Hannibal breathes the *need* deep into his lungs with the taste of his own blood, savouring the scent across his stinging tongue and the roof of his mouth. Approaching Will again now, slow and gentle. "There, can you see me now? Hear me?"

Will's eyes well even more brightly with tears. He nods jerkily, rubbing anxiously at where the sweat drips off his feverish forehead and splatters on the floor.

"It's alright, Will."

Will takes a single stuttering step back away from Hannibal, flaring brilliantly even as he falls. "It is *not* alright - I almost gouged your *eye* out!"

As though this is something Hannibal would rebuke him for, *could* rebuke him for with the placatory pregnancy hormones in Will's saliva running rampant in Hannibal's system. As though anyone should be chastised for defending themselves and their growing child from a perceived danger so well, so beautifully, Will's tongue thoughtlessly, instinctively, darting out to lick away Hannibal's blood where it is still smeared around his lips.

As though Hannibal doesn't badly want to kiss him again and taste that blood on Will's tongue once more, taking communion from the chalice of Will's red red mouth.

"Not quite that bad, I assure you," says Hannibal. He had pulled away from the swipe of Will's claws before Will could do too much damage - though Hannibal will require a mirror to examine the full extent of what Will has managed to do to him. He can certainly feel at least three shallow stinging wounds raking down from his left temple and across into the meat of his cheek; the movement of his mouth as he speaks disturbs the congealing blood and breaks open the new scabs to start bleeding slowly anew. "But I really must remark upon your impeccable aim. Even when a delusion disguised reality from you, you went straight for a disabling attack."

It has been a long, long time since someone else last made Hannibal bleed. Once more, Will Graham has joined the rarefied.

Will shakes his head, rejecting the praise. "I don't know how I got here."

Deciding a change of tactics would be best, Hannibal takes a seat on Will's bed, hoping his own calm will bring Will to him from where Will has defensively backed up near the bathroom door and the exit to the suite. Options for Will to run to still, if Hannibal cannot coax him closer again.

Hannibal waits. Patiently. This hadn't been how he'd predicted his evening would go, but he's captivated regardless. And doubly glad he'd avoided bringing Alana to the hospital with him.

“...I was heading to the rooftop garden downstairs,” says Will. “I-” his breath catches, something wretched trembling his lower lip as he grimaces his way into a self-mocking smile, “I blinked and then I was dreaming. Or having a nightmare. Here. Except I wasn’t asleep.”

“The garden is at least a 10 minute walk away from here through the halls,” Hannibal says gently, and holds his open hand out to Will. Pleased at the answering slip of Will’s clammy fingers against his own, proof of domestication. Reeling Will Graham in slowly between the spread of his thighs: fascinated. “You lost time, and then woke in the middle of a hallucination. What did you see?”

What nightmare had his fevered mind made of Hannibal, to cause Will to lash out against him?

Will isn’t listening to him. “What’s happening to me?” Quietly, eyes downcast - it’s a question to himself.

“Will,” says Hannibal, trying to push past this last barrier Will has erected between the two of them. Tilt his head at the right angle to meet Will’s fathomless eyes under the veil of Will’s inky wet lashes.

Mute, *recalcitrant,* Will only shakes his head again, pulling his fingers out of Hannibal’s grasp and pushing past the cage bars of Hannibal’s thighs. Taking a seat on the bed beside Hannibal, half-bent over his own legs, head low.

Hannibal sighs. “Your encephalitis may be getting worse, in defiance of your treatment. Equally as likely, the steroids being used to treat your encephalitis may be worsening its psychotic symptoms. Donald has recently upped their dose to tackle your illness more aggressively, and you may have had an adverse reaction.”

“Let me guess,” Will mutters, still hunched over, “it’s impossible to tell which?”

“Afraid so.”

The hoarse crackle of Will’s laughter is a callback to their first few meetings, Will husky-voiced from irritation and/or slumber then, still unsure as to what to do with this Dr. Lecter presented so - persistently - before him. An echo of the startled - *vexed* - wonder that had been in Will’s eyes, even then, at finding someone to talk to on his own level, appealing to that divine flicker of dark humour that curls occasionally, wickedly, at the corner of Will’s mouth.

Even sat, as it is now, dispiritedly beside self-deprecation. “I need treatment for my treatment.”

“Unfortunately, not an uncommon situation in modern medicine. *Sola dosis facit venenum*.”

The dose makes the poison, and what can cure can cause ailment at the same time.

When Hannibal reaches out again to lay his hand on the small of Will's back, Will turns just enough to lean into him, his face pressed against Hannibal's shoulder. The tears that had been threatening earlier at last overflow: warm wetness soaks through the material covering Hannibal's upper arm, two spreading and commingling patches of sticky damp.

The tears are just as wet against Hannibal's knuckles when he brushes the back of his hand lightly over the curve of Will's cheek, sticking flesh to clammy flesh even as Hannibal wipes the very worst of tacky tear-trails away. Will hiccup-moans as Hannibal's fingers slide into his hair, Hannibal's nails scratching over the heat of the scalp beneath, catching and snarling a grip on the impossible curls to gently tug Will's head back, lifting Will's splotchy face from Hannibal's arm.

Will still has blood at the corners of his lips, tinged pink where tears and saliva have mixed with it. More sticky tears are still dripping from Will's chin, and the creases in Hannibal's sleeve have left marks on Will's forehead.

"I'm a mess," Will says thickly, scrubbing at his mouth, his cheeks, with the heel of one palm. It doesn't help.

"Yes," Hannibal agrees, and leans down to rub his cheek soothingly against Will's anyway, marking Will with his scent - and being marked by Will's scent and sweat and tears in return. One side, then, with Will looking at him with dazed, gold-tinged eyes once more, the other.

Will's stubble burns slow friction against Hannibal's jaw like the laving of a cat's tongue: the hair longer now than it usually is, rougher as a result. Males who present as omega tend to grow facial hair more slowly than those designated other dynamics and pregnancy hormones slow down the growth even further, but Will's stubble is still substantial enough now that it prickles against Hannibal's thumb where he presses it to the pulse under Will's chin. Potentially less stubble now, and more scruff.

Hannibal kisses the uneven border where the stubble-scruff shifts into smooth skin on Will's neck, feeling the hard answering bob of Will's throat beneath his lips. "You'll need a shave soon," he murmurs, possessively rubbing his cheek there as well, turning his teeth against the tender lines of Will's throat. His bitten tongue is still throbbing behind his incisors, catching the drying salt on Will's skin of a runaway tear.

It pleases some great beast in Hannibal's belly to have his lover smell of him so thoroughly. To have Will smeared with the enveloping scent of Hannibal's bespoke cologne, the deep notes of Hannibal's natural musk seeping underneath.

"Yeah. Yeah, I-" Will shudders at the prick of canines against such delicate flesh, rasping, "I don't think they let the delusional handle razor blades."

"That would depend on the delusion," says Hannibal mildly. And Will's potential violence in reaction to it. "But I could shave you if there were any concerns. If that would be of help to you."

Will leans away from Hannibal's mouth, staring at him. "You-"

Hannibal tilts his head inquiringly - and so is almost toppled straight off the bed when Will all but *flings* himself at him, Hannibal utterly unprepared for the sudden weight at such an awkward angle. Hannibal catches himself before they *both* take a tumble, clutching Will hard against his chest… just as Will is clutching *him,* Will's hands locked as securely as an omega collar behind Hannibal's neck, his face buried in Hannibal's throat. Ducking his head again, covering himself with Hannibal and Hannibal's protection in lieu of seeking out the security of his nest.

Some of the move will, undoubtedly, be an omega's instinctive attempt to endear themselves to the father of their child, to remain foremost in the father's affections at a time when the mother may be unwilling or be deemed too unattractive to engage in sexual intercourse, but beyond the ego-stroking and blatant call to emotion lies a very basic truth: Will's position, buried in Hannibal's arms, trusts Hannibal *implicitly* to offer Will the same - or a better - level of safety as a nest. Trusting himself to Hannibal's care.

Arousal and triumph open up a chasm of *want* in Hannibal's belly.

"Darling boy," he breathes against the tangles of Will's cardamom-spice hair, dragging his nose shamelessly through the sweaty curls there as the soft thread of Will purring begins to vibrate against his jugular.

Will stretches out his neck to bring their mouths together, still purring, the kiss soft and ticklish as a result. Nuzzling into it, coaxing Hannibal into pressing back against the plush swell of his lips, drawing Hannibal's tongue into his mouth with a gratifying amount of eagerness. It stings when he sucks, when fangs drag against the place where they had already bitten down, but Hannibal finds himself groaning from the delightful mix of pleasure-pain, cradling Will's skull with one hand - and catching Will's southward-wandering hand with the other, the heel of Will's palm and his far too clever fingers fondling the bulge of Hannibal's growing erection through the fabric of Hannibal's trousers.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, forcing himself to take a deep breath between the ardour of Will's kisses and a *highly* distracting direct squeeze to the head of his swelling cock. Unperturbed by the hand around his wrist, Will starts plucking at the buttons of Hannibal's slacks. "*Will.* I'm not sure this is either the best time or place for that."

The purring ends abruptly. Will pauses, lifting his head - and their mouths finally part with that soft, damp and otherwise indescribable sound that all but begs for them to be reconnected again.

Confusion stumbles over desire. "I thought -" Will swallows at whatever he sees in Hannibal's expression, the pink flush high in his cheeks spreading and deepening into a dull and embarrassed red. His hand yanks away from Hannibal's crotch so quickly he may as well have been scalded. "Sorry."

"It was hardly an unpleasant experience," Hannibal teases him lightly, but Will only pulls away from him further, staring into the middle distance over Hannibal's shoulder.

Not wanting to push Will into defensive retaliation again - whether that be verbal or physical -, Hannibal lets the moment lie. His short trip to the bathroom isn't quite long enough for him

to compose himself fully or lose the pointed stiff-leggedness of his walk, but he returns with a damp flannel for Will to wipe his face clean with - something the omega takes gratefully.

Will calms himself slowly, dabbing away the last remaining stickiness from his face (cream, blood, sweat, tears and saliva) and cooling the heat of his ever-present fever. Picking at the flecks of drying blood still caught under the ragged edges of his claws.

Loathe as Hannibal is to remove any of Will's weapons from him, for Hannibal's own sake, as long as hallucinations seem likely, a manicure may be as useful as a shave for Will. For everyone's safety and comfort.

Will swallows again, looking down at the griminess of the flannel in his lap. "Have we eaten? I- there were cakes. In my hallucination."

"There were cakes," Hannibal confirms. Pouring and then offering Will a glass of water, an olive branch no doubt less frightening than Hannibal in his entirety in Will's vision at the moment. "An acquaintance of mine is under the impression that I may be feeling a little stressed at the moment, and saw fit to send me a little gift from her new favourite pâtisserie. I thought you may enjoy trying some."

Will had eaten nearly everything Hannibal had set aside for him from Ellen's gift before he had lashed out, sweetly docile to the fruit, chocolate, cake and cream brought to his lips by Hannibal's hand. His soft mouth hot and wet around Hannibal's fingertips as he sucked away the traces of melted sugar there.

Will takes the water but wilts at the confirmation, the defeated slump to his shoulders suggesting he feels the - expensive - desserts may have been wasted on him. "I'm sorry."

Hannibal hums noncommittally. The pâtissier's work had been a gift to *him* rather than Will, and Hannibal had rather enjoyed both the act and the aesthetic of feeding a beautifully biddable Will Graham each of the delicate high-end treats one by one, drawing kisses from Will's unresisting mouth between bites.

Whether Will entirely recalls being fed the cakes and pastries is immaterial to the pleasure Hannibal gained from his gift.

"She sent a box of chocolates for you as well," says Hannibal as Will sips at his drink, his gaze lifted questioningly somewhere around Hannibal's left temple. (Still embarrassed then, and somewhat despondent again with it.) *How does this acquaintance know about me?* "She caught me leaving the hospital on Thanksgiving, and it naturally came out that I was visiting someone very dear to me."

A small hiccup of surprise ripples through Will's frame at the description, a pink flush spreading down his throat with a swallow of water. "Oh, uh - please pass along my thanks?"

"Of course." A pause then, and Hannibal tilts his head, watching curiously as Will fidgets with his glass. Pale fingers sliding through the condensation, drawing whimsical patterns in the beads of water. "What is it?"

Will purses his lips, considering.

Hannibal waits.

Will yields in increments - and then all at once. "...Can't help but feel like I'm watching shadows on cave walls stuck in here. Chained up after a life outside in the sun."

Hannibal takes a seat beside him on the bed once more, a few careful inches of air between them. "You've marked a change in how you perceive reality."

"Delusions aside?" A mirthless smile. "I know there's a world outside this hospital, but all I can see of it right now is what I can see from my windows, what other people bring inside to me. My reality, filtered through theirs. Yours."

"My shadow on your walls." A performance for one. An accusation of influence. "Does it instruct you, or obscure the other silhouettes?"

"I haven't seen the play to the end yet," Will says simply. "But if your shadow's there, it must mean that you're behind me."

Precisely. Hannibal smiles. "Should such a thing as a truly objective reality exist, we must accept that the only way in which any of us shall perceive it is through some degree of filtering. Subjective idealism holds that objective reality is completely dependent upon the minds of those that perceive it. For something to exist, it must be perceived - but perception itself is an unavoidable filter."

"If a tree falls in a lonely forest, and there is no animal nearby to hear it, it *doesn't* make a sound?" Will quips, though his flash of sardonic mirth fades quickly. "Immaterialism. Lonely philosophy."

"Quantum mechanics largely holds that existence in the absence of an observer is, at best, a conjecture. Impossible to prove or disprove."

Will grimaces, setting down his almost-empty glass on the nearby bed-table and bringing up one leg onto the mattress to tuck under his other knee. "...Are you trying to comfort me with light nihilism, or was there some other point to this tangent?"

Will's directness: always so amusingly refreshing. Hannibal huffs out a laugh. "Tell me, Will, have you heard of the term *ukiyo?* "

"...It's ringing a few bells. Geisha, right? Japan? And the art thereof."

Not a wholly erroneous impression. "Translated," Hannibal says, "the characters that make up the word *ukiyo* mean 'the floating - as in, fleeting or transient - world.' A term used to describe the particular lifestyle and culture of urban Edo-period Japan - especially its pleasure-seeking aspects. Most clearly seen in the licensed red-light districts of Edo - now Tokyo -, Kyoto and Osaka.

The art you are thinking of is a genre of Japanese woodblock prints that found their beginnings in those districts: *ukiyo-e,* 'pictures of the floating world.' Depictions of the *ukiyo*

culture and those that inhabited the floating world: geisha and prostitutes, kabuki actors and sumo wrestlers, samurai and merchants.

As a philosophy, *ukiyo* refers to a state of mind that prioritises living in the moment, detached from the cares and worries of life."

"So," Will says after a thoughtful pause, tapping an idle beat *one-two-three* on the side of his knee. "Japanese *hakuna matata?* "

A perfect - and perfectly crushing - summarisation of the point.

"...Yes." Hannibal sighs through his nose, drawing strength before continuing: "Perhaps you might consider this hospital ward *your* floating world, Will: a space removed from your everyday life and its many demands and obligations. What happens outside of these four walls will happen without you, yes, but everything that you need to concentrate on is here, within." Will gives him a dubious look. "It is the here and now that is important, Will, and here and now you only need to focus on your own health and wellbeing. Nothing else."

"I can't just float away, Hannibal," Will says, his tone of voice reasonable even though anxiety is prickling in his scent, creasing lines on his brow. Both of his hands are on his knee now, wrapped around his calf and thigh. "Drift through life in a dream of denial. That doesn't work for people." He shakes his head, a tumble of curls. "People unavoidably pick up flotsam and jetsam as they drift along the currents of life, and eventually it weighs enough it's an anchor to somewhere. Someone. Some*thing.* Hell, even otters hold hands while they sleep, so they don't drift away from each other."

Hannibal offers out his own hands to Will in the space between their bodies, his palms open and upraised.

Will blinks at them. Him. "...Those look a mite bigger than otter paws," he says slowly, and Hannibal quirks a smile at him.

"All the better to hold you with, my dear."

Will snorts, but does, hesitantly, lift his own hands to place them secure in Hannibal's grip. Some part of him is instinctively aware, even now, that he is trusting himself more than metaphorically to a wolf. "Say I choose to embrace your philosophy, Grandma. What now?"

Hannibal squeezes those hands in his trust gently, rubbing his thumbs reassuringly over their backs. "Now," he says, "we focus on you getting well."

Since it had been medically rather important, Hannibal had had to report Will's 'little incident' with, first, losing time, and then coming back to awareness in the midst of a hallucination. Will has the sneaking suspicion Hannibal had severely downplayed the violence of Will's response to the things he had seen during his episode, even with Will's claw marks quite obvious on Hannibal's face, as no restraints or extra medications are suggested to Will by his medical team… but that still doesn't make Will's resulting conversations with Dr. Donald Head-Shoved-So-Far-Up-His-Own-Ass-He-Could-Probably-Diagnose-His-Own-Stomach-Ulcers Sutcliffe any less unbearable during his Thursday morning rounds.

Over the time he's been treating Will, Sutcliffe's bedside manner has cycled through various iterations of asshole before getting firmly stuck on *patronising*. He talks down to Will as though Will is a young child or a particularly well-trained monkey, his scent thick and cloyingly sticky.

The attitude is not as uncommon as it ought to be when talking to omegas, especially from alphas, but it's particularly galling for Will to have it directed at him by *another omega.*

So perhaps Will doesn't tell Sutcliffe about how he attacked Hannibal either. Or anything about the barking dog he's been hearing in the hospital.

Or about how, as Sutcliffe keeps yammering on inanely about Will's next scheduled lumbar puncture and Will sits there propping up his head with his hands, Will can feel his hands sinking into the tissue of his face like his flesh and bones are quicksand. Displaced by his hand, his wrist, the contents of Will's skull pour through his horrified fingers like grains of sand in an hourglass.

Wet, meaty red chunks splatter down onto Will's lap, the mess overflowing and spreading out onto the hospital bed he is sitting on. A lump of cartilage that may have once been part of Will's nose slithers disgustingly down the outside of the pile, trailing ragged patches of skin, and topples off the bed. The *splat* it makes on impact with one of Sutcliffe's shiny brown leather shoes causes bile to lurch up into the back of Will's throat, and he *just* manages to fling himself off the bed and over to the nearby trash can in time to heave up what he'd eaten for breakfast.

When Will can finally stand up again, everything is back to normal - albeit the kind of normal that includes a furiously pounding headache perched right behind his eyeballs. All the features of Will's face are exactly where they should be, and there is no pile of viscera sitting on his bed.

"Is your morning sickness still troubling you?" Sutcliffe asks him with a frown.

Outside of its importance, medically, to how they proceed with treatment for Will's encephalitis - and thus how the combined conditions make Will's case of particular interest for academic study -, Sutcliffe has tended to regard everything associated with Will's pregnancy with a mild disdain - at best. That aspect of Will's care has been squarely placed in Dr. Morgan-Moore's kinder - and, evidently, much more capable - hands, to the relief of all parties involved.

“Only when I smell something disagreeable,” says Will, and pointedly abandons the doctor so he can go and brush his teeth.

It’s not a productive consultation, but the rest of Will’s morning is hardly terribly productive either. His head is pounding too much for him to read. Beverly texts him, complaining about all the data she and the rest of her team still have to input about the Pagoda crime scene and ask-announcing that she’ll be visiting him again after work the following day. (And if Dr. Babydaddy Lecter wants to feed her again, she won’t complain.)

A knock on the ward suite’s door disturbs Will from the trite daytime drama he’s half-watching - on *low* volume - on TV rather than answering a handful of emails in his work inbox. Some moony-eyed omega is swooning dramatically on-screen as two different alphas are on their knees before her, begging her to allow them each to be the only one to officially court her. Will is glad to switch it off. “Come in?”

A familiar pretty head sticks itself around the door’s edge, and Will rises from his seat on the sofa with a genuine smile, stepping forward to greet his guest. “Alana.”

Still wrapped up warmly in a long grey wool coat against the December chill, Alana wears an answering smile as she enters the room, though she looks with a questioningly pointed amusement at the drawn blinds over the ward’s windows, the lack of electric light on overhead. Without even the light of the TV screen now to illuminate the room, Will’s ward is quite dark, the cloudy winter skies outside selfish with their sunshine even at midday.

“Very moody in here.”

The light (all light) had been irritating Will’s headache. “That’s me all over.” He leans against the back of the sofa, gaze dropping to the familiar white card box in Alana’s hands as he folds his arms over his chest. It seems Alana believes the two of them are overdue a *talk* again. “You brought muffins.”

Alana ducks her head behind the loose swing of her hair for a moment, embarrassed at being so quickly called out. “I brought cupcakes. Didn’t think you were really a flowers or balloons kind of guy, and I always end up eating all the grapes I’m supposed to be bringing other people, so.” She shrugs, mock-helpless, very *what can you do* ?

“Dr. Bloom. You diabolical snacker.”

“Charcuterie boards and *hors d’œuvres* are my mortal foes,” Alana confides, before she finally manages to catch Will’s eyes with her own. Her smile falters. Falls. “Oh, Will.” Upset. About him.

Her distress hits Will in the chest, building up an anxious little ball under his diaphragm. Will has to close his eyes against it to avoid drowning in it, an answering mirror of tears already prickling along the line of his lashes.

This is why he’d waited until Alana had contacted him to tell her about his encephalitis, his stay in the hospital. Alana wears her emotions so prominently she cannot help but leave traces of them everywhere she goes, and Will cannot help but pick up on them and reflect

them back at her. Will had known Alana cared enough about him she'd be distressed by his encephalitis diagnosis, but her worry, on top of his own… It had been easier to push back that problem to address another day.

Just like he's still doing by not telling Alana that he's pregnant.

Feeling mildly guilty in the face of Alana's obvious - if predictable - concern now, Will sighs. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"You have autoimmune encephalitis," Alana points out with a very forgiving amount of gentleness, setting down her cupcakes on the sofa beside them. "The worrying was always going to happen." Her pale hand with its pink-painted nails reaches out to caress his cheek, her mouth twisting unhappily at the contrast between her cool skin and his own. "You're really warm," she says softly.

Will leans into the violet-scented curve of Alana's palm, enjoying the relief the coolness brings to his aching head, if only for a moment or two. "I tend to run hot anyway. They say stress raises body temperature."

"I'd offer you some aspirin, but I don't think this is something that aspirin will fix." Her fingers still stroking over his jawline, Alana tries to search out Will's eyes with her own again.

Will very carefully avoids them. "I'd tell you they're giving me the good stuff, but, frankly, it all sucks."

Alana *ah*s a quiet *ah* that really means nothing at all, and drops her hand. (Will, through a monumental feat of willpower, does *not* whine at its loss.) "...I was worried you wouldn't answer my call."

"Why wouldn't I answer your call?"

"You didn't tell me you were in hospital. You didn't tell me you were *sick.* I had to find out half the story from emails from the Academy; I thought you were avoiding me. Only Hannibal stopped me from driving out to Wolf Trap. Let me know you weren't there." Alana pauses as she realises something, and Will shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Feeling the guilt a little more strongly now. "Where are the dogs?"

"Kennelled." Will lifts one hand to rub awkwardly at the back of his neck, pushing aside the tangles of his hair. "Sorry. I didn't-" think anyone, even Alana, would care *that* much - "I've had a lot on my mind. And my mind…" A vague gesture. *Oh, encephalitis. What can you do?*

Alana sighs at him, not entirely without sympathy, but Will has laid down the trump card. "They've asked me if I'll take on your classes at the Academy. Until you get back."

Huh. "That's some undertaking. No conflicts with Georgetown?"

"Not really. Do you mind?"

“Mind? No. It’s actually reassuring to know some buffoon won’t mangle my syllabus.”

Alana smiles again at Will’s familiar show of selective misanthropy. Reassured that Will is not so sick he can’t complain about idiots stinking up his classroom. “I was wondering if you’d share?”

“My syllabus?”

“Any of your lecture plans or notes,” says Alana. Earnest now. “I want to try and stick as closely to your original term plan as possible, not disrupt anything. And it’d save me a lot of work.”

Flattering, even with the added explanation. Alana is much less likely to get Jack Crawford sweeping into her lecture hall and ending one of her classes prematurely for a case; Will’s students this cycle might actually *learn* some of the things he had intended them to, albeit without him.

...Does he still have essays to mark for them?

“I’d be happy to,” says Will, smiling a rather strained smile as he tries to remember if he still has essays he has to mark for his classes. Or essays to collect. “Uh-” he waves a hand at the room around him, all the seats available for Alana to take her pick from, “if you want to sit down, I can email you all of it now.”

(...It’s essays to collect. Analyses of the Ripper’s Pagoda tableau. *Fuck.*)

Alana chooses a seat beside her cupcakes on the sofa, removing her long charcoal grey coat and laying it over the sofa’s arm before sitting down. Smoothing the skirt of her wrap dress over her knees: patterned fabric, thick, grey or blue inkblots that look almost like leaves over cream. Very Rorschach. “I didn’t mean to hurry you.”

She fits in Will’s room full of shadows. And yet she’s still so vibrant Will finds it hard to look away from her, push himself away from the sofa so he can go boot up his laptop. “Best to do it now, in case I forget. Time moves strangely in hospitals.” And in his head.

Will sets himself up at the ward’s little dining table to work: the seats there give him better support for his back, and he has a lot of files to email to Alana. Of course, his task would be easier to do over the Academy’s secure intranet or if he could download his files to a USB, but. They both have to make do with what’s available *where* Will is available.

“This is a really nice ward,” Alana remarks absently.

“Yeah, uh- Dr. Lecter pulled some strings,” Will says. Still clicking and dragging files to attach to his email. Screen as dim as he can get it whilst still being able to see. “Got me an appointment with a neurosurgeon friend of his who works here because some of my symptoms were bothering him, and it was. Just. Easier to stay here than transfer.”

“Hannibal brought you here?” Alana startles, obviously surprised. Will glances over at her, curious. “Sorry, I didn’t realise you were still seeing him.”

“Still-?” Does she think-? “Hannibal’s not my doctor. We’re friends.”

“Oh. I apologise, I just assumed…”

“That I needed to see a psychiatrist?” Will frowns.

Alana purses her lips at him, very clearly put-out by his tone but trying not to show it. “There’s nothing wrong with seeing a psychiatrist.”

“No,” Will agrees, very deliberately turning back to his laptop, “there’s not. But the ones *I* prefer to see are in a personal rather than a professional context. FBI duties aside.” And he’s a little put-out himself that Alana had immediately assumed the only time Will would talk to a psychiatrist would be in an official session, especially since she is one herself.

“You’ll have to be careful,” Alana tries to joke, injecting her words with a weak warmth she’s hoping very badly will catch flame to smooth over her misstep. Twisting her fingers up in knots in her lap. “Have one too many psychiatrist friends and people might get the idea you tolerate the profession.”

Will sighs inwardly and goes along with it, one forgiveness in return for another. “Cupcakes and psychiatrists. I’ll be sure to add that to my dating profile.” Alana pauses very noticeably *again.* “What?”

“You just don’t seem like you date.”

Will *ohh*s, turning towards Alana again, one arm resting comfortably along the back of his chair. Teasing, when he catches sight of Alana’s blush, “Too broken to date?”

“You’re not broken,” says Alana. Which is. Actually pretty good to hear. “You’re puzzled.”

“I *am* puzzled. What’s your excuse?”

“For not dating?” Alana blinks, her eyes very big and blue in the dim room around them. She hadn’t expected to have the topic turned back on her. “Why are you assuming I don’t date?”

Mostly because of the way she has not so much let Will down gently from his several timid - but still obvious - romantic overtures towards her, and more sidestepped those overtures altogether. And not mentioned them, even though she still appears to be *pleased* by them.

Will could accuse Alana of leading him on, but he doesn’t think it’s something she’s doing deliberately. And he thinks - *hopes* - it’s something they’re both hoping *will* actually lead somewhere one day. Maybe. They both have other priorities to handle first.

“Do you?” Will asks, not unkindly, and Alana deflates a bit, settling back further into the sofa.

“No. Feels like something for somebody else. I’m sure I’ll become that somebody someday but right now I think too much.”

It’s not you; it’s me.

“It’s hard to date when you notice everything they do and have a pretty good idea why they do it,” Will offers - and snorts when Alana makes a terribly grumbling *mm-hmm* in agreement with him, hauling up the box of cupcakes beside her onto her lap to fish one out in consolation. “The diabolical snacker strikes again.”

“They’re harvest-apple with spiced buttercream,” Alana tells him primly, before she takes a big bite out of her cupcake. A dab of cream immediately speckles her nose. “...Worse than dating a psychiatrist is being a psychiatrist dating.”

Will saves his email to his drafts, then heads over to grab one of the cupcakes before Alana can eat them all. “Are you going to try to think less or wait until it happens naturally?”

“I haven’t thought about it,” Alana says, staring rather pensively at her cupcake as Will takes the seat beside her, his own prize in his hands. His bare feet and pyjama pants look a little ridiculous next to Alana’s winter boots and wrap dress, but their knees still knock companionably together.

“Burn that bridge when you get to it,” Will advises - only to immediately get another arch look from Alana for his cynicism. (The effect is diminished a little by the cream still perched proudly on her nose. Will hasn’t reached out to thumb it away. He still wants to.) He shrugs, and takes a bite of spiced buttercream. “Or cross it. Whatever you want.”

“It seems you have been through the wars since we last spoke.”

Hannibal smiles pleasantly, feeling the itch of the healing scabs on his face with the movement of his mouth. “All is fair in love and war, as they say.”

Hannibal is still fair, even with a slightly swollen tongue and four thin healing gouges upon his face. Both injuries are, of course, Will’s handiwork, and Hannibal takes every opportunity to admire them in passing mirrors. The claws of Will’s index, middle and ring fingers had managed to catch Hannibal in a wicked line from his temple down over his cheek, whilst the claw of Will’s little finger had hooked behind Hannibal’s cheekbone before Hannibal had managed to pull away from the slash aimed at his eyes, puncturing the flesh there in a smaller but deeper wound.

Hannibal wears his injuries with an easy pride, taking some amusement from the double-takes his patients and various acquaintances had made that day upon first seeing his marred face. A few of them had delicately danced around the subject of Hannibal’s new wounds, clearly dying to ask what had happened to him, but none had remarked on the topic to Hannibal directly - save, of course, Bedelia, who waits only for Hannibal to settle into his usual seat opposite her in her home before mentioning the obvious change in his appearance.

Perhaps it pleases her to see Hannibal marked in such a way. Perhaps it worries her.

Studying the way the low, noontime sunlight refracts through her glacier blue eyes, unhidden by the lowered fringe of her lashes, Hannibal believes it may be a mixture of both.

Bedelia gives nothing further away. “Was it love or war which left those scratches upon your face?”

“The two are not so easily delineated,” Hannibal opines, still smiling. “Both are passions.”

“Both can cause great regret. Have your passions brought you regret, Hannibal?”

“I cannot say that they have lately. Not for a long time.”

“Then what have they brought you instead?”

Hannibal considers for a moment before deciding. “Anticipation.”

Bedelia does not so much raise her eyebrows as her eyebrows are, inquiringly, raised. An event divorced from her personal investment. “Anticipation?”

“For the future. For revitalisation and renewal.”

“A new lease of life,” Bedelia observes, offering neither approval nor disapproval in her tone. Only the faintest hint of wine on her breath: a sweet white, Hannibal suspects by its notes. Floral, and likely mixed in a spritzer. “Prompted by whoever it was that injured you?”

“A friend of mine. Will Graham. We’ve discussed him before.”

“Your colleague at the FBI,” Bedelia concludes, and Hannibal dips his head in acknowledgement. The same. “Have you allowed him to find his way over your walls?”

Will has found his way over a few of Hannibal’s walls, Hannibal believes - primarily, the walls that Hannibal has deliberately shown him. There will be more walls - hurdles and a labyrinth to overcome - in Will’s future, because Hannibal has no interest in keeping a pretty blind pet at his side. And Will Graham *will* be staying at Hannibal’s side, because Will is far too clever a creature to be allowed anywhere else.

“Will is troubled,” Hannibal says. A non-answer.

Bedelia tilts her head minutely, the movement causing a slight displacement of the styled coil of her hair over one shoulder. “And that troubles you more than you are accustomed to being troubled by others.”

It distracts Hannibal for a moment, that displaced hair. Something itching in him, very mildly, to fix it back into its initial place.

He had referred a patient to Bedelia some time ago, back before she had stopped seeing - most - patients: a young, wealthy alpha man with obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, amongst other issues. Aware, at least on some level, that it was impossible to impose his ideal

of order on the chaos of the greater world, the patient had managed to handle his disorder in part by rigidly enforcing order in a microcosm of his own making: a little world of bespoke dolls built inside the vast rooms of his own home. Perfectionism scaled to fit the possibilities of life. Each doll had been a miniature, a perfect replica of a living person - or animal - in the patient's life, and had been supplied with equally detailed replicas of the living person's wardrobe, personal effects, and places where the patient might interact with the doll's inspiration in real life.

The references the patient had required for this level of detail had inspired a shameless amount of stalking on his part, especially when Hannibal's more rarefied sartorial decisions began to infuriate him. Unable, as it turned out at the time, to find the source of the Italian silk from which Hannibal had ordered a selection of ties and matching pocket-squares to order tiny matching copies of his own. Utterly lost as to where he might order Hannibal's bespoke colognes to scent his Hannibal doll with, and driven into a fury because of it.

Desperate to reclaim control, the patient had smashed the Hannibal doll's head in with a hammer, and then brought both the broken doll and hammer to his next appointment with Hannibal. Disappointingly threatening Hannibal with neither of them, utterly morose in the aftermath of his outburst.

Hannibal had arranged his referral to Bedelia there and then, and Bedelia, as far as Hannibal is aware, had seen that patient for almost two years.

Her patient *must* have made a doll replica of her in all that time; the particular manifestation of his disorder would have compelled him to do so. A perfect tiny Bedelia Du Maurier in a perfect tiny world, clothes and office pristine, not a single hair on her tiny doll head askew.

How amazing: the effects of an attentive and tyrannical god. Even with an inattentive one, the Damoclean hammer still hovers overhead for them all. And Will -

"He is currently hospitalised with encephalitis," Hannibal says.

"I see," Bedelia says carefully. A doctor of the mind must have some education in maladies of the brain. "His prognosis?"

"Will was diagnosed early enough that the disease had not yet damaged his physical health irreparably, and there is no reason he should not make a full recovery. His encephalitis is, however, autoimmune in nature, and is proving resistant in the face of first-line treatments." Hannibal pauses delicately, not unaware that the situation he is now describing is less optimistic than his initial statement. "Will has begun to slip in and out of psychosis."

"It is not unusual for people to be concerned when witnessing someone they know suffering in such a way," Bedelia says, her words framed more as guidance than as commentary on whether Hannibal *is* actually concerned or not. An outline of the socially-expected response to the scenario posited to her, should any of her conversational partners be required to display the 'appropriate' emotions in public. "Your own experiences as a doctor of both the body and the mind must inform you that, after treatment has begun to be administered, the symptoms of many encephalopathies often grow more severe before any significant improvement can be witnessed."

There can be truth even in triteness: it is always darkest before the day dawns. But how dark will the night be that Will's fever has swept over him? Hannibal is unaccustomed to being so invested in the outcome of such a question, unable to be wholly ambivalent about the chances of Will and their baby's - mental *and* physical - survival through the course of the encephalitis.

Of course the progress of Will's disease is fascinating. But circumstances demand that the disease be *limited.*

"I see his madness," Hannibal murmurs, "and I want to contain it. Like an oil spill."

"Oil is valuable," says Bedelia. "What value does Will Graham's madness have for you?"

The room dims. Outside, the weak winter sun has passed behind thick clouds.

Hannibal's eyes narrow, his hands still loosely clasped where he had first left them on the bend of his knee. "You're suggesting I'm more fascinated with the madness than the man."

Bedelia remains still. Uncowed. "Are you?"

"No."

Silence in the dim room for several long moments, the scent of cool tuberose inhaled and exhaled with each slow, easy breath from Hannibal's lungs. Bedelia must have freshly applied her perfume before Hannibal's appointment; the alpha pheromones in its make-up are still strong, and they are usually the first notes to fade against a beta's body chemistry when worn for some time.

They still hide, for now, Bedelia's own emotions.

"Will realised early on that he saw things differently than other people," Hannibal says. "Felt things differently."

"So did you," says Bedelia.

Once more, Hannibal nods. "I see myself in Will." They are both perfectly alike in their uniqueness, and perfectly opposite. Each other but through a glass, darkly, and one day they shall witness one another face to face.

"Do you see yourself in his madness?"

...That would very much depend, Hannibal supposes, on how one chooses to define the word. What is insanity for some is mere foolishness to another, and to a third is the chaos from which all potential might be born. "Madness can be a medicine for the modern world. You take it in moderation, it's beneficial."

"You overdose," Bedelia points out, "and there are unfortunate side-effects."

"Side-effects can be temporary," says Hannibal. He has had more than a few patients take the seat opposite him in his own office with nothing more wrong with them than some regretful

concerns on how they handled their short-lived mid-life crises. “They can be a boost to our psychological immune systems to help fight the existential crises of normal life.”

“Will Graham doesn’t present you with problems from normal life.”

The sun emerges from behind its clouds again, and a shaft of gold is diffused through the diaphanous curtains at Bedelia’s windows. Soft, soft, in the air and against the floor, but making a sharper line of Bedelia’s silhouette.

“No,” Hannibal agrees after another brief pause, “he doesn’t.”

“What *does* he present you with? The anticipation you spoke of?”

“And the opportunity for friendship.”

Bedelia had been expecting something else: a more complicated response. Hannibal has surprised her, a change marked by the slightest widening of her eyes. She had expected Hannibal’s interest in his colleague to wane once he had satisfied his curiosity about the other man, not realising, even with the descriptions of Will that Hannibal had given her, that Will is someone that inspires curiosity anew every day. Every hour. Every *moment.*

(Will Graham lives and breathes and exists on the same earth at the same time as Hannibal Lecter. Oh, what a wonder.)

“You’ve helped me to better understand what I want in a friendship,” Hannibal says, the explanation a gift for Bedelia’s services. She really is a terribly useful resource for him. “And what I don’t.”

Bedelia composes herself again, a quick fix after her slight slip of emotion. “Someone worthy of your friendship.”

Worthy. The adjective is an apt one, a bell struck and resonating purely in Hannibal’s mind.

He smiles at Bedelia again, feeling his eyes - and the scratches Will had left on his face - crinkle at the corners. “Yes.”

Will is in a good mood by the time evening rolls around. He hadn’t had any episodes of lost time that day - that he’s aware of -, and Alana’s visit earlier had left him, if not buoyant, feeling like some great weight had been lifted from off his chest. The expanded space inside his ribcage is filled with little fizzing bubbles he could almost describe as hope or happiness or simple *positivity.* It’s strange. And it’s a relief, even though Will’s head is still pounding and his nipples are now *aching* and he’s a little fed-up with just how often he’s having to take trips to the toilet these days. (Encephalitis issues meeting pregnancy issues. Things are only

going to get *more* achey in Will's chest in the months to come, Will knows, and his bladder is *doomed*, because one day, touch wood, there'll be the full weight of a baby pushing down on it.)

He'd saved one of the apple-harvest cupcakes for Hannibal: some kind of apology for trying to take the other man's eye out in a frightened delusion the other day. Perhaps it's a little alarming how quickly Will has grown accustomed to seeing Hannibal every day - so accustomed he's started setting perishable items aside for Hannibal, knowing the doctor will be swinging by soon enough to pick them up -, but it's. Nice. To have something to consistently look forward to, the promise that, no matter how Will's day has gone, there'll be something near the end of it to give it a little upswing. The hospital can be pretty lonely otherwise.

When he arrives, Hannibal has brought ham ribollita, bread rolls, and some kind of spicy chocolate cookies with him. Tea from the hospital kitchens, and the *apéritif* Hannibal's smile when they sit at the table together and Will immediately starts digging into the meal.

The ribollita is basically just a fancy stew, but it's filling and flavourful with the chunks Will has torn off his buttered bread roll and dipped into his bowl. Ham, beans, tomatoes, spinach. It takes three vanished mouthfuls before Will remembers his manners, swallowing the latest chunk of bread and ham down his throat before blurting out his apologies. Hannibal hadn't even managed to serve *himself* before Will had started eating, and Will hasn't thanked him for the food at all.

Hannibal shakes his head, setting aside the bread roll he had been carefully slicing in half. "I am only relieved to see that you have an appetite today." He reaches across the table, his hand wide and cool across Will's forehead, a balm to the permanent fever raging there. Will's forehead might as well be a magnet these days, considering how many people touch it. "You're still rather warm today. How's the headache?"

"Present, but manageable." Will leans shamelessly into Hannibal's palm, enjoying the contact. Enjoying the way it makes Hannibal smile back at him, a little pleased quirk of the beta's plush lips, and the forgiveness it implies. It's a relief to still have Hannibal smiling at him like that, especially with the livid scabs still healing on one side of Hannibal's face. "Better with food."

"You should have the dinner that the hospital provides for you tomorrow." Hannibal's hand falls away from Will - a brief pass back through the damp dangle of Will's curls before it's gone completely. Picking up Hannibal's bread roll again to butter it nonchalantly. "I'm afraid I won't be available to visit you."

For a moment, Will is too busy mourning the loss of Hannibal's touch to register what it is that Hannibal has said. When the words *do* sink in, disappointment lances Will anew. "Oh." Realising he's gripping his own spoon a little too hard: "I- yes, of course. Thanks for letting me know. Got a fancy do to go to?"

"None so engaging I wouldn't rather be here. No, a business acquaintance of mine requires some wining and dining to… encourage him to adapt to my way of thinking."

“You’re buttering up some asshole to get your own way,” Will surmises, utterly unrepentant about vocalising his blunt interpretation - and pleased, when it causes Hannibal to flash him a quick, crooked grin. One swift glimpse of teeth. “Sounds grim.”

“At least I know the food will be good,” says Hannibal with his usual complete lack of shame, and Will starts to laugh right as Hannibal takes his first bite of their meal.

The food disappears into their bellies, bite by delicious bite. Will is warmed by the sustenance, by the tea and company and laughter, and is flushed and smiling with it as Hannibal clears away their dishware and cutlery, the tubs he had brought their meal in.

When Hannibal straightens from packing his thermal bag Will stands, touching the beta’s chest with one inviting hand, lifting his chin just enough he can rub his cheek against Hannibal’s on the uninjured side. Returning Hannibal’s quiet hum of pleasure with an even quieter purr of his own, his lips pressed for a moment to the corner of Hannibal’s mouth. The salt of ham there, the salt-sweat of skin. Will’s own scent, something close to actual contentment.

Will pulls back with a smile, scant inches between their faces. Warm and happy. And just a little bit horny, his cock twitching hopefully in his pyjama pants. “Yeah?”

Hannibal’s fingers stroke the small of Will’s back promisingly, finding that lovely little sliver of bare skin between Will’s t-shirt and Will’s pyjama bottoms and sending a shiver up Will’s spine with his fingertips. But he shakes his head. “Not tonight, Will, if that is alright with you.”

Will’s smile drops. *Will* drops, his mood immediately taking a nosedive and his weight falling more heavily onto the soles of his feet, his eyes darting between the gouges he’d taken out of Hannibal’s face and the whiskey-brown of Hannibal’s own eyes. “Is it because I-?”

“No,” Hannibal says firmly, before Will spirals too far into self-recrimination. “It’s not because of that, Will. I have simply had a long day and I’m not in the mood.”

Hannibal hadn’t been in the mood the other day *either.* But that’s not something Will can argue about. “Sorry.”

“No harm done.” Hannibal kisses Will’s forehead, tender but chaste, and Will sighs. Frustrated. Guilty. Irritatingly forlorn.

They part again, and Hannibal doesn’t stay for much longer after that. Leaving the hospital room so much emptier than before, and the air feeling so much colder on Will’s skin with only the scent of Hannibal’s cologne against his cheek and throat left to warm him.

The apple-harvest cupcake that Will had saved for Hannibal is still sitting on Will’s bedside cabinet. Will had forgotten to hand it over to Hannibal - or to mention Alana’s visit to Hannibal at all.

He eats it, not-quite-sulking - and then gives up entirely when the cupcake disintegrates in his hand and a large blob of the buttercream *splats* into his lap.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay in getting this chapter out. *vague gestures* LIFE. It just keeps happening.

Île flottante: (floating island) a dessert consisting of baked meringue floating on a dish or in a bowl atop a pool of crème anglaise. The dish can be served at room temperature or chilled.
References to the dish in French and English date back to at least the 18th century, though (contentiously) both the early French and English versions of this dessert appear to have been made with thin, liquor-soaked bread/spongecake/biscuit slices piled high with layers of jelly and frothed cream, either floating in a pool of custard or with custard and/or a fruit purée poured over the construction. Partially as a consequence, there is some argument as to who invented the modern version of the floating island as it is enjoyed today, especially as there are many similar recipes in both English and French dating back to the Middle Ages.

Ham ribollita

ratatouille

Chapter Summary

Kiss, kiss, kiss.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m sorry, Will,” Beverly murmurs down the phone. “Raincheck?”

“Raincheck,” Will agrees softly, standing at the windows to his ward and watching frost-laced Baltimore glitter in the morning sun. He'd been doing some online shopping when Beverly had called him, but now the cool surface of his cell phone’s screen is pressed against his ear: flat, cold and unforgiving against his cheek. “I understand. Duty calls.”

“See you when I see you,” says Beverly, and Will ends the call with a soft *beep*.

Beverly doesn’t have time to visit that evening. She’s en-route to a crime scene: a family found dead at their dinner table in Bangor, Maine. Parents, two young children, all four shot in the head.

Nobody likes family killings. Especially not when the kids are young.

Will breathes out with a slow sigh, and the warmth of his breath clouds the glass before him. Baltimore lost to the mist.

It’s cold.

Frost steals over Maryland in the night and makes every breath outside thereafter crackle in the lungs. The world’s stage glitters keenly at its edges, rendering each of Hannibal’s steps as he treads across its boards, both the grand ones and the minute, bright and crystalline. It brings a sharp focus to Hannibal’s actions on a busy night, the brisk weather invigorating the senses and reminding him what it is to be alive.

Restocking his fridge and pantry takes Hannibal more than a few hours, and it is late enough to almost be morning as he sets his fresh sweetbreads to soak. More meat is ground down and

seasoned before being forced into casing for a string of short, fat sausages: more than enough for breakfast in a few hours as well as Hannibal's evening plans.

Sleep. A day of patients, then home again to the prepared fireplaces in Hannibal's dining room and parlour. Lit only - for now - in the former, apple wood mixed with oak to create a sweet-smelling fire that will burn long and low through the night with a warm, steady heat.

The flames are appreciated when, outside, the snow begins to fall. A thin blanket of white has already draped itself across Baltimore by the time Hannibal opens his front door again a few hours later, greeting his wind-chafed, snow-speckled guest standing there.

"Donald."

Donald's footprints up the path to Hannibal's door are already disappearing under another flurry of snowflakes, imprints filling up with white. With the door now opened to admit him, Donald whisks himself inside Hannibal's home just as quickly, blattering the usual banalities about the weather. Wiping his shoes, peeling off his gloves. Trying to be playfully roguish, crinkle-eyed, asking if Hannibal's coat closet is in the same place as it had been the last time he'd come to Hannibal's for dinner.

It is. Hannibal disappoints Donald by waiting for the omega to slip his own damp coat off himself before taking it from him, hanging it on a hook outside of the closet to dry.

The quiet, precise notes from a looping playlist of Bach's *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* lead the way into the dining room, Donald's quiet breath of impressed pleasure at the sight of the laden table there barely heard over the music.

The decorations tonight are simple, proud sunflowers with their stems snipped short and placed in a slim red vase. They, like the music, are both a noted comment and instructional: as sunflowers turn to follow the sun throughout the day, so too do Donald Sutcliffe's eyes, as of late, pursue Hannibal. Like all sun-chasers since the overambitious Icarus, Donald should mind how high he dares to fly, lest his wings melt, his skin burn, or his stem be removed with a deft snip of Hannibal's scissors.

Little of Donald's attention is spared on the flowers. His fingertips trail over Hannibal's arm as Hannibal pulls out a seat for him before the fire, his naked scent already heavy with the perfume of a fresh fig just sliced. "If I had known it was going to be Spanish night, I'd've brought my castanets."

"I fear you might find my flamenco to be somewhat lacking," Hannibal jests lightly, pouring Donald a glass of the Rioja he had left out to breathe earlier as the other man takes his seat. Chilled water in another glass beside, to perhaps cool the omega's blood long enough for them both to eat.

"Pity." Donald lifts the wine to toast him with, smile suggestive against the rim of his glass even as the liquid within begins to stain his lips. Determined tonight, it seems, to make his interest and intentions towards Hannibal clear. Again. "I always enjoyed your tango."

Hannibal gives him a reproachful look that is more amused than chastising, and Donald chuckles again. His eyes are still hungry for more than food as Hannibal moves towards the centrepiece of their meal that night, already spiked and locked into place in a *jamonera* on the table beside him: a large beautiful leg of *jamón ibérico de bellota,* still on the bone, red rope cord twisted elegantly behind the artificial hoof.

Around the magnificent leg of cured ham sits an array of tapas to choose from: octopus salad served on a bed of maldon sea-salted seaweed, a platter of tomato and pesto toasts, and brochettes of the sausage and sweetbreads Hannibal had prepared the night before with olives and peppers. A shrimp boil - the shrimps still clawed, spiked through with cocktail sticks - sits garnished with green and purple brussel sprouts atop a bed of kale, whilst another platter has been covered in roses made of carved tomatoes and thinly-sliced *ibérico morcón* twisted into shape. There are smaller dishes of dried peppers, green *bella di cerignola* olives, and apricots. A dish of almonds fried in olive oil and sprinkled with sea-salt sits beside a plate holding a large wedge of imported *queso manchego viejo,* grapes, walnuts and smoked almonds. *Patatas bravas* on one side of the table are mirrored by *garbanzos* with spinach on the other. Small triangles of toasted bread rest on platters beside individual placemats.

The bounty is an indulgence in scale with the quality of the *jamón* - and will leave Hannibal plenty of leftovers with which to swiftly create further dishes for himself, Will, and any other, currently unforeseen, company.

Dark pink flesh curls away from the edge of Hannibal's knife as he slices carefully into the leg on his table, a rose whose wafer-thin petals bloom widely despite the frost. Hannibal piles the meat up generously on plates with roasted bone marrow and parsley salad, red cockfeathers artfully pulled through a hollow bone beside to decorate the china beneath.

Donald hums in pleasure when Hannibal places one of the plates before him - a low pleased note, deliberately close to a purr. "The *jamón ibérico.*"

"There is no equivalent," says Hannibal, returning to the *jamón* to slice off his own portion. The meat is beautifully marbled with cream-coloured intramuscular fat: a mark of the animal's rich diet on the local *bellota* - acorns -, chestnuts and roots of the pastures and oak groves of Spain.

Donald has already taken a bite of his, savouring the mouthful with an affectation of fluttering eyes as he swallows. Selecting some of the tapas available on the table for his plate. "Still love your little rare treats, don't you, Hannibal? The more expensive and difficult they are to obtain the better."

"It's a distinction that adds an expectation of quality," says Hannibal.

It takes time and skill to produce items of higher quality, and more time to learn those skills required for said production. And time, of course, is money.

"Not always," Donald cavils, taking another sip of his wine.

The fire's warmth licks at Hannibal's spine. He *sighs* through his nose, setting down the *cuchillo jamonero* to take his plate over to his seat at the head of the table. "For *ibérico,* only

a few thousand are selected each year." Hannibal gathers some tapas for himself as his guest looks expectantly on: the *bella di cerignola,* a portion of the octopus. Salt, to make him thirst for his wine. "Once chosen, they roam the fields of Western Spain, enjoying a diet of local acorns and roots which give the ham its distinct flavour. But is the pig, once fattened and slaughtered and air-cured, superior to any other pig, or is it simply a matter of reputation preceding product?"

After a season of the pigs gorging themselves in the pastures, and the slaughter, the process by which the finest producers of *jamones ibéricos* salt, dry and cure their meat takes over two years. Time is money - and that is a great deal of time to spare for a joint of meat.

Donald nods sagely. "It's irrelevant." He lifts another forkful of *jamón* in front of him, an object of study for both of them. Even gathered up on tines, the meat is sliced thinly enough that the firelight passes through it, darker shadows spotted in the warm pink where the fat marbles the cut. "If the meat-eater thinks it's superior, then the belief determines value."

So spoken by a man who knows the material price of everything and the true value of nothing.

"A case of psychology overriding neurology," Hannibal murmurs, spreading bone marrow onto one of the pieces of toasted bread by his plate as Donald sticks his own forkful into his mouth to chew.

Smug, inelegant mastication.

The fire crackles, scenting the air with sweet apple and oak instead of musk, figs and clary sage. Layers of toasted bread, velvety bone marrow, and smooth, rich-tasting *jamón* crunch between Hannibal's teeth, creamy, savoury flavours dancing across his tongue. *Delicious.*

"So we know how *Ibérico* chooses his pigs…" Donald says, still chewing. His pale eyes are rapt on Hannibal, frankly, openly, curious. Gaze flickering deliberately to the healing scabs on Hannibal's face. "How did you get yours?"

Rude.

Hannibal's genial smile solidifies on his lips. Hardened. He sets down his toast, dabbing away crumbs from his mouth with a napkin. "Are you referring to Will Graham?"

"The last time a hospital saw you daily," Donald says with relish, as if presenting some grand *aperçu*, "*you* were still a practising surgeon. But Will Graham's ward draws you in almost every day now, moth to flame." He swallows his mouthful at last. "Not to mention the personal escort you provided him with to his diagnostic appointment."

Hannibal says nothing, waiting patiently as Donald takes another large gulp of wine.

"I assume you're the father?" Donald asks baldly, and Hannibal inclines his head. "Congratulations. If it *is* congratulations? You always seemed personally disinterested in the notion of fatherhood."

“Ambivalent would, perhaps, be a better descriptor,” Hannibal corrects. Certainly none of the partners he had cycled through around the times of his affairs with Donald - including Donald himself - had inspired Hannibal with any paternalistic longing. “It is not a role I require to feel fulfilment in my life, but I find, now it has been presented to me, that it offers me opportunities that I had not previously considered.”

“*Carpe diem,*” says Donald, and lifts the remainder of his glass of Rioja for a toast. His sleeve is pulled back from his wrist with the movement, releasing another saccharine blossom of figs-and-clary scent across the dinner table. “*Et noctem,*” Donald adds salaciously, when Hannibal raises his own glass as well.

Hannibal smiles thinly, and, when they drink, barely wets his lips with the wine. He has not missed the obvious *dislike* Will has been nurturing for Donald Sutcliffe, nor Donald’s disdain for Will, and had hoped to play on both - but now finds the boundaries of his own patience being tested instead.

Donald is arrogant and antagonistic by nature, and has always treated others rudely that he considers somehow beneath himself. Perceived as an equal, Hannibal has always received the utmost courtesy, both personally and professionally, from Donald, but someone like Will - a ‘silly’, pregnant, unmated, unmarried omega, clearly poorer than Hannibal and with no doctorate to his name, a ‘mere’ *teacher* - barely receives the civility he deserves as Donald’s patient and a human being. Donald assuming, quite incorrectly, that *Will* is the lesser intellect in the room of the two of them, and doing his best to hold the length of his acquaintance with Hannibal over Will’s head.

Of course Donald will brag about this dinner to Will. Hannibal had invited Donald to such an intimate dinner in the full knowledge that Donald *would* brag about it to Will, intending to both discuss the future of Will’s treatment with Donald at the table *and* provoke Will later into some kind of jealous response.

Will has been fed on a surfeit of Hannibal’s daily affection and attention as of late, gently conditioned into accepting the care that Hannibal can provide him with - relatively - little questioning. But Hannibal wants Will to *want* him rather than merely accept his occasional presence, and, for that, Will needs to understand just what he may lose should Hannibal turn away from him. Creating a hollow in Will’s life that is all the more intolerable now Will knows what it feels like to have that empty space filled.

Unfortunately, Hannibal hadn’t quite accounted for just how *tiresome* Donald’s presence feels to him now in a more social sphere. How had Hannibal once managed to have two separate affairs with such a wearisome omega?

Hannibal tops up their wine glasses, hoping Donald will take the hint and drink - or eat - instead of continuing to talk.

When had idle seduction turned into such a chore?

“I expect,” Donald says, his lips stretching wide in a lazy, insolent smile, “if you choose surrogacy again, you’ll be screening the other genetic donor for rare encephalopathies before signing on the dotted line.”

...Donald has been making more than a few assumptions, it seems. Along with the implication that Hannibal resents spending his wealth to cover Will's - and their baby's - care.

"Will is not my surrogate," Hannibal says coolly.

Donald's eyes widen momentarily with surprise, his hand pausing over the plate of shrimp as he reaches for one of them to add to his plate. "He's not your mate or your fiancé either."

"No," Hannibal confirms, although Will's medical forms already say as much.

"Are you courting?"

"No," Hannibal says again.

"...The pregnancy was a surprise for you as well," Donald realises, and finally remembers he had been trying to reach for some more food. Rather belatedly adding a few shrimps and a handful of salted almonds to his plate. "Well, I'll be damned."

He certainly will.

"Will is my friend," says Hannibal crisply, picking up his cutlery to begin cutting at some of the meat on his own plate.

"He's a single omega carrying a beta's *oops* baby," is Donald's blunt rejoinder, the gold gleaming around the edges of his irises far too self-satisfied for Hannibal's pleasure as he tears into one of the shrimps. Slurping up its insides before shucking off the shell. "A rich, highly successful beta's *oops* baby. They'll call him a gold-digger right before they crucify him."

As though Donald has not been mentally calling Will a gold-digger from the start.

When Hannibal smiles again, his lips peel back from his teeth. "I wouldn't recommend anyone try."

Donald *hmm*s, his pursed mouth shining with the shrimp's juices. It's not as tantalising as he no doubt intends it to be: in the end, all Hannibal sees is just more wet meat. "You're fond of the rarefied. What makes Will Graham so rare?"

"Will has a remarkably vivid imagination. Beautiful. Pure empathy. There is nothing he can't understand and that terrifies him."

"And now his mind is on fire."

Hannibal continues cutting his meat, slicing sweetbreads and sausage into smaller and smaller pieces. An orderly segmentation, compartmentalising life and death on the microcosm of a plate. "Imagination is an interesting accelerant for fever."

Donald sighs, and wipes his hands clean on the napkin Hannibal had left beside his place setting. "It seems to be defying the conventional retarders."

“His chart suggests that you haven’t tried very many.”

“Whilst his condition remains relatively stable, it’s better for us to take things slowly rather than rushing through all of the treatments one after the other. Second-line immunotherapy would prevent the employment of plasmapheresis, and Graham has shown enough response to plasmapheresis, in combination with corticosteroids, that I still have hopes for his current course of treatment."

"Even with the nascent development of psychosis?"

"That can always be managed with antipsychotics. The plan,” Donald says, “is to keep him on the higher dosage for at least a week. See if he settles into it. If there’s no significant improvement, we’ll switch him over to IVIG.”

The proposal is reasonable but it will likely be of little comfort to Will, whose psychotic symptoms may be further aggravated by the steroids. And antipsychotics can have peculiar reactions with pregnancy and different encephalopathies.

“Should IVIG fail,” Hannibal pries, “I assume you will be moving Will onto a course of rituximab?” His guest frowns at him. “First-line immunotherapy fails in 50% of all anti-NMDAR cases, Donald. Corticosteroids *and* IVIG.”

“...Rituximab is most likely to be the next step, yes,” Donald says grudgingly. “*If* the first-line treatments fail.”

Plasmapheresis would remove rituximab, a chimeric monoclonal antibody, from the blood, so the medication in question can only be employed once the plasmapheresis-based treatments have been tried and failed.

Rituximab binds itself to the CD20/CD19 proteins found on the surface of B cells of the immune system, which secrete antibodies, and triggers cell death. This rapidly and effectively depletes the body of those same antibodies that are currently attacking Will’s brain, with a great deal less toxicity than other B cell-depleting medications.

Will, Hannibal believes, would probably prefer it to his current steroidal regimen. “Weekly injections rather than daily drips.”

Provided his symptoms remained manageable, Will could even be moved to out-patient care.

“I see you’ve been doing your reading,” says Donald, still evidently put-out either by the questioning of his plans or Hannibal’s display of knowledge that Donald can no longer hold over him.

“For obvious reasons,” Hannibal says somewhat dryly, and picks up his wine again to swirl before his nose, “I have some investment in the outcome of this case.”

“That you do,” says Donald, and largely subsides into - blessed - silence for the rest of their dinner.

Outside, the snow continues to fall.

Inside, Hannibal banks the fire in his dining room and lights the one in his parlour as the music ends, escorting Donald through to the other room and serving squares of sweet *turrón de Jijona* with cups of dark, bitter coffee.

Donald slides to his knees before Hannibal's seat after a few not-too-sobering sips of his coffee, the fire catching and flickering on the gold in his eyes again. His omega scent is heavy with syrupy figs once more as he presses between the spread of Hannibal's thighs, his mouth and fingertips sticky from the honeyed *turrón.*

When he plucks at the fastening of Hannibal's trousers, Hannibal redirects him with a hand under Donald's chin, lifting the other man's mouth into a dominating kiss. Letting his tongue sweep into the cavern of Donald's mouth, the taste of coffee, almonds and honey backed by the heavy tannins of red wine.

"My impending fatherhood doesn't seem to trouble you," Hannibal murmurs as he withdraws from Donald's lips, continuing to caress Donald's cheek with his thumb. He'll have to scrub his hands thoroughly after this.

Donald's teeth glint as he grins, made cocky, sloppy, by confidence and just a little too much wine. "Are you asking me to babysit?"

"No," says Hannibal, and accepts another kiss as Donald surges up against him, pushing Hannibal back into the cushions of the sofa. Entirely too eager, and utterly failing to note Hannibal's own lack of physical response to his ardour. Hannibal's palm slides to his nape - which Hannibal squeezes, warningly.

Donald lifts his head, still a little hazy behind the eyes.

"I think," Hannibal suggests to him delicately, "we may both have indulged a little too much in the Rioja this evening for continuing this to be a good idea."

Hannibal has not. But both he and Donald had kept Donald's wine glass topped up most of the night - deliberately, in Hannibal's case.

"Let me call you a cab," says Hannibal, and presses back lightly on Donald's chest until the other man takes the hint with a beleaguered *sigh,* lifting his weight from Hannibal's.

"Age has made you far too responsible, Hannibal," Donald grumbles good-naturedly, getting awkwardly to his feet to pop another square of *turrón* into his mouth. Washing down the sweet with his cooling coffee.

"Experience has taught me the delight of hangovers," says Hannibal, and fixes an amicable smile onto his face until they have both finished their coffee, the called cab has arrived, and Donald has been shown out of the waiting front door.

Hannibal sets himself to cleaning, and, though, outside, the snow continues to fall in thick drifts of white, inside, Hannibal is kept warm by his work and the apple-oak woods burning on his fires.

The nurses at the desk on Will's floor have been playing Christmas music all day. They have a playlist by the sounds of it, cycling through the same 26 songs. By the *fifth* time (in Will's hearing) Elvis' warbling *Lonely This Christmas* has segued into the irritatingly jingly *There is No Christmas Like a Home Christmas* Will has well and truly had enough, firmly closing the door to his ward suite and shutting out everyone and everything but the faintest murmur of noise.

Loudest now is Will's heartbeat, drumming in his ears. The strange not-sound of standing in an insulated room and watching the ceaseless drift of fast-falling snow in the night outside.

Baltimore's city lights barely shine through the smothering off-colour white. Strange shadowed creatures made by the whirling snowflakes slink through the sky, all gleaming eyes and yawning mouths in the air.

A hard knot of ice has lodged itself behind Will's breastbone, sharp edges knocking against the thump of his heart.

Will shivers. Alone. Barely even thinking about it as he crawls into his nest away from the dangers in the snow, drawing the curtains closed after him to keep in the warmth. Nestling down into the blankets he had arranged there: the scent of tea and sugar, himself and Hannibal.

Hannibal's scent is everywhere in Will's suite these days, his cologne a semi-permanent background note even with sterilising industrial cleaners at work on the medical equipment and floor. The smell of it is a light caress down Will's spine from a hand unseen, warmth and support against Will's spine even when Hannibal is away.

Hannibal had left his jacket in Will's nest the night he had goaded Will into making a nest: a *hideously* soft thing in charcoal twill. After waking up still wrapped in it, Will had squirrelled away the jacket under a complicated arrangement of blankets and pillows at the very back of the nest so Hannibal couldn't steal the piece of clothing back again, burying the jacket in the precise, softest, spot in the nest where Will prefers to lay his head. Taking comfort, even now, in the slow, steady drag of Hannibal's scent into his lungs as he drifts into a doze in the protected darkness of his nest, though the scent alone is not enough to thaw the ice spiking through the tender insides of Will's ribcage.

Will sleeps.

Will wakes. Pulling back the cover of the window beside him just enough to see that the snow has stopped, and the moonlight emerging from the clouds makes the white landscape alien, bleak and hard.

The cover goes back into place, and Will sleeps again. Black, leafless branches and black grasping hands spreading out against the clouded night sky inside his mind, claws and thorns indistinguishable from one another as they chase Will's frostbitten feet out onto the vast, threatening expanse of a frozen-over lake.

The ice creaks and groans underfoot.

Will's joints creak and groan when he wakes again to pale Saturday morning sunlight, his nurse's far too cheerful smile, and his mandated pre-breakfast snack of plain wholemeal toast.

Breakfast itself is a gloopy smoothie and 'winter berry' oatmeal. Both look like someone has murdered one of Santa's little helpers and blitzed the corpse with breakfast-like ingredients, so apparently Santa's workshop has an extradition treaty with the USA.

(There always *had* seemed to be something criminal about the Elf on the Shelf.)

Will eats. Will naps in his bed. Will reads one of his books - after barraging his door again against the encroaching tide of *Jingle Bell Rock.* Will blinks, and it's lunchtime and the half-eaten bowl of vegetable soup on the bed-table in front of him is already cold.

Alana, still carrying the scent of the wind and snow on her, is standing beside his bed and taking off her coat. Talking. Because apparently they're in the middle of a conversation.

"- something if you've morphed into an epicurean." She turns, and catches sight of Will's frozen expression. Frowning: "...Is the soup really that bad?"

"It's -" Will has no idea. His hand has locked around the spoon in his grasp, and it takes some effort for him to lower the spoon into the bowl beneath it and let go. Panic claws up the inside of his throat - or bile. Will swallows it down again, whichever it is. "Just not appealing today."

"Will they make you something else if you ask them to?" Alana asks, frowning even more when Will swings himself off the bed to stand in front of her. Breathing in the violets in her perfume as the hem of her dress brushes against his thighs, his bare toes finding drops of melting snow on the floor that Alana has brought inside with her. "You need to keep your strength up."

"I won't starve," Will assures her, and smiles.

Alana's answering smile is a hesitant, unsure thing as she searches Will's eyes with her own, but the sight of it still dislodges the keen, cold thing sitting in Will's chest a little. Turning the sharpest edges of it into meltwater, sending icy droplets dribbling down Will's spine.

He shivers again. Noticeably.

Alana's palm reaches up to touch his forehead. Her other hand flits worriedly to his arm. "You should really get back into bed."

Will remains standing. Reaching back to grasp Alana's elbow. "That the doctor's orders, Dr. Bloom?"

“It’s your friend’s advice,” Alana tells him reproachfully, though the jury is out on whether the reproach is meant for Will or for needing to remind herself. “Since you’re not my patient.”

“No,” Will says, “I’m not,” and tugs Alana up against himself, dipping his head to nuzzle against Alana’s cheek, bringing his mouth against her sweet, pink own in a kiss.

Hopefully he doesn’t taste too much like vomit. Or sad vegetables.

Here is the knowledge that thrills an aching part of him: Alana kisses him back. Her mouth and body soft and yielding against his, a low little sound of yearning reverberating in her throat as Will’s free hand settles on the curve of her waist.

And then Alana pauses, her brow furrowing, and breaks their kiss. “I’m confused.” Still close enough her breath warms Will’s throat, and Will cannot help but sway into her, rubbing his cheek softly against hers until Alana instinctively does the same in return.

“You *have* to stop thinking so much.” Will kisses her again, gently, purring a little at the frantic butterfly-fluttering of Alana’s eyelashes against his skin, her hands now spread warm and open over his shoulders. Stroking. Grounding.

“I can stop the thinking if we’re not…” Another kiss, and a quick, little wanting gasp of indrawn breath. “But if we’re…”

“Intimate,” Will supplies, nuzzling their faces together again and trying to rub away the furrow in Alana’s brow with his own. Letting his mouth drift softly across the smooth expanse of Alana’s cheek.

She smells like him now, the scent of her perfume and the lotions she must have applied to her face and body that morning overridden by his own warm and smoky spice, the crisp snow smell still caught up in her hair. If Will keeps his eyes closed and his mind floating, they could be caught up in a snowglobe together, dreaming in a picture-perfect moment of glitter and bubbles.

But Alana persists. “The way I am in relationships - not that this is a relationship, it’s just a kiss, a great kiss -, but the way I am isn’t compatible with…”

“The way I am.” Will sighs. “Beta woman. Omega man.”

Alana’s hands tighten on his shoulders, and Will lifts his head to the sight of her big blue eyes full of hurt. “You *know* that’s not what I mean.”

“Then it doesn’t matter.”

“How can I trust that you mean that when your decision-making may be compromised by encephalitis? I’d be taking advantage of you. Of the situation.”

“By all means,” Will says, “take advantage.” Bumping their foreheads together, so Alana can see nothing but the sincerity in his own eyes. The truth. “Alana. I felt like this even before I was sick. So did you.”

Will's timing isn't great - he knows it isn't, and he's doing his best not to think about it. His timing's not great, but this is the time they have now to deal with this. Them. The *this* that's been hovering between *them* for a long time now.

“I wouldn’t be good for you,” Alana insists, though she still hasn’t let go of him. “You wouldn’t be good for me. *We* wouldn’t be good for either of us. Not now. Not like this. I wouldn’t be able to stop analysing. I have a professional curiosity about you.”

She has *more* than just a professional curiosity about Will. Will can see it. *Feel* it, physically and emotionally.

Will kisses Alana again, and, again, she kisses him back, her lips lingering the longest between the two of them, softening over the chapped skin of his own.

“I’m not your patient,” Will murmurs against her mouth. Imploring, nuzzling up against Alana as she swallows, a hard bob in her throat.

“If I were my patient -”

“Alana.”

“- my advice to me would be... don’t do this. I have to take my own advice.” Gently, Alana pushes on Will’s shoulders, urging her body away from his. Cold air sweeping in immediately to fill the void between them. “I’m going to go ahead and go now. Will, please get back into your bed. Wrap up warmly.”

Will remains standing in the same spot as Alana grabs her coat again, all but fleeing for the door. Alana does, however, turn one last time before she departs, and the expression on her face states that Will, to her, looks exactly as pathetic and abandoned as he feels.

“I’ll see you soon,” she says, and then exits immediately - leaving Will alone, again. Feeling even colder than before, with a bowl of cold inedible vegetable soup.

Will cuts a morose figure laying alone on his bed in the dim hospital room, sheets tangled around his legs. He’s a wan, pale thing in his pyjamas, still, his head tilted away from the door and his arm still outstretched at the odd angle beside him Hannibal is accustomed to seeing on patients trying not to get their limbs tangled up in IV lines.

The drip, however, should be gone for the night; Hillary had greeted Hannibal in the hall outside Will’s suite and cheerfully informed him she’d unhooked Will half an hour prior.

Will’s rooms are quiet: a small vacuum of peace from the busy city outside the hospital, Baltimore’s streets already blinking and flashing with holiday lights. Assuming Will is

asleep, Hannibal shucks off the thermal bag over his shoulder and his coat - only to pause when he catches the very much *alert* eyes, at once both dark and bright, watching him through the reflection in the ward room's windows. Two shadow-shelves imposed upon the night.

"Will," says Hannibal with genuine warmth, laying his coat over the back of the chair by the omega's bed and his hand over Will's nearest one.

Hannibal had dressed casually for the weekend and Will, in slacks and cashmere sweater, deliberately appealing to Will's need for home comforts in a hospital environment. Creating an image of approachability, domesticity - and not unaware that the last time he had worn something similar, Will had spent the entire night checking him out.

Will's fingers slip out from under his. "I kissed Alana Bloom."

Cold glacial *wrath* washes over Hannibal from head to foot, all the muscles of his body coiled, tensing, into a deadly stillness.

Alana Bloom again. The woman is developing the most *terrible* habit of walking into situations precisely where Hannibal doesn't want her, grinding his most-important plans under the heels of her pretty but eminently sensible shoes.

Will - wild, beautiful, *lonely* Will - had been meant to turn to *Hannibal* for comfort. Only Hannibal could sate Will's appetite for true companionship and understanding, providing food and drink, affection, protection and *family* beside. Will longs to truly *be*long somewhere, to someone, and so Hannibal has made a space for him. For them. Hannibal, Will, and their baby. Abigail too, if Will wants that.

Will exchanging smitten glances with Alana Bloom, of all people, does not fit into that. There will be no triad between the three of them: in this, Hannibal absolutely refuses to share.

"We agreed to let each other know about any potential toe-treading," Will provides when Hannibal doesn't say anything, turning his head on his pillows to look at Hannibal at last. His throat is exposed, placatory, but he still has the night in his eyes, bleak and black. "Toes were in range of being trodden upon."

"I see," Hannibal says neutrally, and takes a seat on the chair. "Tell me, what was Alana's reaction?"

Will hardly seems happy for someone who has finally kissed the person they've been attracted to for some time. "She said she wouldn't be good for me and I wouldn't be good for her."

Ah. Alana had declined the honour that would be wasted on her.

Anger drains out of Hannibal's body like pus lanced from a wound, leaving only the smaller petty hurt from the initial injury behind. "I don't disagree."

Will's face twists: *wounded.*

(Alana may have wisely withdrawn herself from the field of battle, this time, hopefully - for her own sake - for good, but Will still needs to atone.)

“She would feel an obligation to her field of study to observe you,” Hannibal says. “And you would resent her for it.”

“I know,” Will says bitterly, and pushes himself up with his elbows into sitting upright. Looking all the more drained for doing so. Hannibal should feed him now.

Hannibal does not. “Wondering then why you kissed her.”

“Wanted to kiss her since I met her. She's very kissable.”

“You waited a long time, which suggests you were kissing her for a reason in addition to wanting to.”

Hurt and self-pity shift into irritation, and Will lashes out. “What does it *matter,* Hannibal? She said no. Nothing has changed.”

“Something quite fundamental in your relationship with a friend has changed,” Hannibal chides him calmly, leaning back into his seat and admiring the brief flash of Will’s snarl in his direction. This is not a fair battle, but it is enjoyable to see Will refusing to go down without a fight.

“I lost time again. I was reading after breakfast and then I was looking down at my half-eaten lunch. And she was there.”

A life-buoy in Will’s sea of confusion, so far from his little boat in the haven of Wolf Trap.

Will curls in on himself. “Couldn’t lose the time whilst she *left* though, could I.”

“Memories are precious things, Will,” Hannibal admonishes, but reaches out again to rub Will’s thigh through the thin barrier of the hospital bedlinens. Unable to remain physically distant from such a beautiful show of self-destruction, Will too lovely even in ruin. “Even the painful ones. We are who we are in the now and we are the sum of our memories, our lived experiences.”

“Then I’m incomplete. There are pieces of myself that I cannot see.”

“Look for them then,” Hannibal suggests, squeezing with his hand until he can feel the throb of the pulse in Will’s femoral artery, until Will’s eyes flash with retaliatory gold around the edges in response, “reflected in others.”

“*Refracted,*” Will corrects him accusingly, and Hannibal acknowledges the - accurate - amendment with a brief hum of concession in his throat. “That’s a composition made of hearsay. A story with an unreliable narrator, even if I haven’t lost the plot entirely.”

But better than nothing.

“That’s why you kissed Alana. A clutch for balance.”

“Because I’m losing mine,” says Will, and pulls his leg out of Hannibal’s grasp to tuck his knees up against his chest. Putting unsubtle inches of bed between them. His scent is… complicated. “I- I’m hallucinating things. Still. I lay here and watched the walls melting this afternoon, thick globs of paint giving way to viscous black tar. The nurses had no reaction, so I knew it wasn’t real.”

“When we cannot trust our own perception of reality,” Hannibal says gently, keeping his fallen hand outstretched, “we must place our faith in the people around us.”

Place your faith in me, *Will.*

Will turns his face aside, muttering, “Some people who regularly have visual hallucinations just snap pictures with their phone.”

“That can work occasionally as a quick fix,” says Hannibal. When Will still very determinedly won’t look at him: “Will, you have me as your gauge.”

“Yeah?” That gets a physical response at least, a viper-quick *glance* from under the dark veil of Will’s eyelashes, his curls hanging over his eyes. *Challenging.* “Check the walls for me.”

Hannibal lifts a brow, silently asking if the other man is serious, and Will nods at him. *Go on.*

Dutifully, Hannibal turns in his seat to slowly examine the walls of the hospital room around them both, one after the other. Nothing has changed about them since the last time he’d laid eyes on them. “They appear to be quite solid from where I am sitting.”

“That’s no good,” Will tells him brusquely, his lips thinning at the proactively inquiring tilt of Hannibal’s head: *and why not?* “In so many months, touch wood, you’re going to be a father. What will you do when th- when our child wakes you in the middle of the night in a few years time and tells you there’s a monster under their bed?”

Many, many, *many* years ago, when his sister had woken him up in the middle of the night with that very complaint, Hannibal had crawled under Mischa’s bed whilst the little girl squeaked on the mattress above him. Scared the monster was going to eat her brother up and then burp up Hannibal’s slippers.

There had been no room for monsters under her bed, Hannibal had told her, wiggling his fingers around the edge of the mattress until Mischa had giggled and stretched out her own little pudgy hands to hold his. Not when Hannibal had been there under the bed taking up all the room.

If he closes his eyes and wanders back into the echoes of his past, Hannibal can still feel the slip of those chubby little fingers into the safekeeping of his own. The memory tucked away safely in a rosewood trinket box in the twilit, older corridors of his mind, its little silver singing bird automaton rarely daring, any more, to make a single peep.

But times - and people - have changed since then. Hannibal is not so small any more that he believes he can reasonably fit under the average bedframe, and so the hypothetical scenario posed to him demands a new, equally as practical, solution.

The issue, of course, is not that children believe monsters exist, because children are perfectly correct. The problem is that children must learn that monsters can be outwitted.

“I’ll teach them how to fight the monster,” Hannibal says, matter-of-fact, “or, if the child is more strategically-minded, how to make the monster their ally instead.”

The heuristic method, applied young. No more children placed into Hannibal’s care will face the world without defences of their own, even should Hannibal not be there himself to remove the obstacle from their lives.

Will blinks, his face doing a complicated *something* as he lifts it from behind his knees. Impressed. Amused. And bewildered, all at once. “...Okay. Long-term? Good parenting. I think. Short-term -”

Hannibal purses his lips, sensing the *but.*

“Short-term,” Will points out, “there is no way that method is going to get anyone back to bed for a restful night’s sleep before school in the morning.”

A tired, cranky, well-educated child is still a tired cranky child.

Hannibal allows himself a single, brief, wincing blink. “...I concede the point.”

Will huffs - laughing, Hannibal realises, a quiver in Will’s shoulders and a telltale, lopsided grin showing from behind the poor cover of Will’s fist. Hannibal has been seen.

Hannibal gives him an indulgently exasperated look, but rises from the chair to go and lay his palms against the expanse of the nearest wall. Leaning into it with his whole body weight, testing the - nonexistent - give of paint and plaster, bricks and mortar. “Perfectly solid.”

He returns to Will’s bedside but, rather than taking a seat again, waits until he has Will’s eyes squarely on him before dropping down into an easy crouch on the floor. Whisking back the trailing ends of the hospital bedsheets before him and examining the space beneath the bed with grandly exaggerated gravitas. “No monsters under here, either.”

Will snorts, unfolding from his hunched-up position so he can lean over the edge of the bed beside Hannibal. Close enough Hannibal can feel the heat of his skin, that Will’s sweat-and-cardamom curls tickle against Hannibal’s forehead: a modern-day *Belle Dame sans Merci*. “Not even a ferocious dust-bunny?”

“Alas,” says Hannibal, smiling in return, “the hospital cleaners are to be commended.”

He turns his head. Through the dangling hair, Will is looking at him, sideways.

Hannibal lifts a hand, and slowly, tenderly, tucks back a few of the tumbling curls behind Will’s ear, gentling his smile when Will shivers all over, sagging on the bed. Will’s belly to the mattress, and his still-prickly cheek turning into the curve of Hannibal’s palm, the delicate whisper of his eyelashes against Hannibal’s thumb.

It would be so easy, in this moment, to crush him. To drive the edge of a nail into the vulnerable sclera of Will's eyeball, through and back into the meat in the skull behind. To grab Will by the hair, and slam his face repeatedly into the lowered metal handrail of the bed until the bones crack, until Will's nose is smashed to a bloody pulp and his fangs are shattered stumps in his jaw.

Hannibal leans up on his haunches, instead, and slots their mouths together. Soft to soft, the bitten edges of the skin on Will's lower lip soothed by Hannibal's tongue sweeping along the seam, the taste of old blood shared between them where the flesh had split from worrying it.

Will moans, quiet but guttural, letting more of his weight droop into Hannibal's grasp, into the rake of Hannibal's fingers back through his hair, Hannibal cradling Will's skull now with both hands. His scent around them both is fragrant, sweet and humid, smothering to the senses when they both share the same warm, damp breaths.

Both of them kiss hungrily, eyes - barely - open. The slivers of Will's irises are blue-gold, gold-blue, the vision of a glorious sunrise spilling over a glimmering koi pond, and his cheeks bloom with a happy blush.

It doesn't take much.

It doesn't seem to take much, either, for Will to lose the taste of Alana Bloom in his mouth, too preoccupied with keeping Hannibal in place to kiss him. A little involuntary chirp of discontent escapes Will's throat when Hannibal parts their lips for a moment to realign them, his palm already falling proprietorially to Hannibal's nape to guide their mouths back together before Hannibal can do much more than lightly tug on his hair.

"I brought dinner," Hannibal says after a few more drowning moments of kissing, smiling again at the petulant scrape of Will's fangs along his lower lip, teeth tugging flesh out of place.

"I don't care about dinner," Will mutters back into Hannibal's mouth, his thumb rubbing distractedly back and forth over the tendon in Hannibal's throat.

Hannibal kisses him briefly again. "Unfortunately, I care about you not caring about dinner." He stands, feeling some of the burn in his calves from being locked into one awkward position for so long, pulling himself from Will's grasp with the same movement. "We can resume this after we've eaten."

Still half-sprawled across the bed, the look Will turns on Hannibal is disgruntled - and thoroughly lacking in any fire, his lips swollen from kissing and hair hopelessly askew again. Hannibal helps him to sit up, and then steers Will over to the little dining table in the suite to sit down before going to fetch his half-forgotten thermal bag filled with their meal for the evening.

The high-quality lining of the bag has mostly maintained the temperature of the food placed inside of it, and so the bowl placed before Will sends up a pleasing flourish of savoury steam when Hannibal removes its lid.

"*Menestra de Verduras*. A Spanish, primarily vegetable, stew." A crusty bread roll laid beside each dish before Hannibal takes a seat. "What's better than a hearty stew on a cold winter's night?"

"A decent cup of coffee with a shot of bourbon," Will quips, smiling tiredly to take any sting out of his words. One hand splayed loosely over his abdomen: that which denies him both caffeine and alcohol. "Not that this isn't a great runner-up."

The *menestra*'s recipe had called for the use of *jamón serrano* or prosciutto, finely chopped and cooked with garlic, oil, flour and white wine before being mixed with a variety of blanched, battered and fried vegetables. Hannibal had substituted in some of his leftover, more expensive, *jamón ibérico* instead, adding the sweetbreads from the few leftover brochettes as well.

Each individual bite could cover the cost of one of the bottles of whiskey on Will's shelf back in Wolf Trap. Likely more, to account for the cheaper swill.

Will considers a vegetable on his fork: a battered artichoke heart skewered on the tines. What does it look like to him, presented in a field of hazy gold? "I thought only aliens actually ate artichokes."

Hannibal hums, breaking the bread to dip into his bowl. "Processing them entirely from field to plate does require a certain level of masochism, I'll admit."

"If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well," Will sighs, and his bare toes nudge against Hannibal's covered ankles beneath the table. They had both forgotten to grab Will's slippers. "You're just a glutton for punishment."

"Among many other things," says Hannibal, and smiles at Will crookedly until the tips of Will's ears turn pink and the omega bows his head to the food. Artichoke heart disappearing into Will's mouth, a sliver of *jamón* and a sweetbread that bursts between Will's teeth.

Hannibal had brought some of the *turrón* for afterwards but, by the time the *menestra* has been eaten, the 'afterwards' both he and Will are looking forward to does not involve food.

They stand, almost swaying, together, Will's wrists crossed behind Hannibal's neck, Will's nose already dragging sweetly across Hannibal's cheek. His laughter rolls with a purr at its edges when Hannibal takes the opportunity to take two choice handfuls of Will Graham's ass, nuzzling against Hannibal's scent gland for a moment before pressing an open-mouthed kiss against Hannibal's jaw.

Distance has made Will crave closeness. Alana's rejection has made Will turn to seek validation elsewhere. And freely-offered affection, promised and delivered upon, has given Will whatever security he required to allow himself to be affectionate, yielding to every touch, every suggestion.

"Now," Hannibal asks him, allowing himself another squeeze of the rounded flesh currently filling his hands, "where were we?"

Will lifts his chin and studies Hannibal for a moment. A curious, assessing stare.

“Will?”

Will kisses him softly, then slips himself out of Hannibal’s hold. Padding, barefoot, over to his nesting area and drawing back its curtain. Looking back over his shoulder to offer his hand out to Hannibal. “C’mere.”

Hannibal pauses. Not because he is hesitant, not because of any qualms… The moment, this moment, *matters,* and the form of Hannibal that Hannibal has been cultivating in Will’s perception would be gentlemanly to acknowledge it. Courteous enough to pause for confirmation before sweeping in to claim the fertile land in victory.

Because this, of course, is a *victory.*

“Are you certain?” Hannibal asks. Carefully. Warningly. Once invited into Will’s nest, Hannibal will not easily be dislodged again.

Will only gestures with his open hand again: *please*. “Never more so.”

So Hannibal goes. Drawn in and down into the soft, welcoming dimness of Will’s nest, bracketing Will on his back beneath him with knees and forearms as the curtain swishes closed behind them both.

The space smells so much like *Will,* sugar, spice, pine and smoke, that Hannibal can smell nothing else. Scent, touch and taste replace sight, Hannibal’s mouth tracing out Will’s features below him as their eyes adjust to the change in lighting. Here, the heat of Will’s forehead and right temple. Here, the slant of Will’s cheekbone, the sweep upwards into the cartilage of Will’s impertinent nose. The scruff of Will’s jaw, rasping like a cat’s tongue against Hannibal’s chin. The soft puff of Will’s laugh against ear, Will’s hand sliding up under the hem of Hannibal’s sweater, Will’s nails raking teasingly over the trail of hair beneath until Hannibal closes the distance between their bodies, sinking downwards into the warm snug cradle of Will’s thighs.

Will’s skin tastes like salt, a little soap, and himself. His smiling mouth, uplifted like a chalice to sip kisses from, like their meal and Hannibal.

The day’s last traces of Alana Bloom are absolutely forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

> *Ratatouille:* (from Occitan *ratatolha*, related to French *ratouiller* and *tatouiller*, expressive forms of the verb *touiller*, ‘to stir up’) a Provençal dish of stewed vegetables, originating in Nice (thus sometimes referred to as *ratatouille niçoise*). There are many different recipes for the dish, but common ingredients include tomatoes, garlic, onions, courgettes, aubergines, bell peppers and leafy green herbs common to the region the dish

is being prepared in, with tomatoes as the foundation for everything else.
From the late 18th century, *ratatouille* merely referred to a coarse stew. The modern recipe did not appear in print until 1930.

Information and inspiration for Hannibal and Donald Sutcliffe's dinner scene was taken from the blog of the lovely and ridiculously talented Janice Poon, and her work for *Buffet Froid.*

I'm not all too sure what flowers were actually on the table for Hannibal's dinner with Sutcliffe in the show: I caught sight of the ragged ends of bright yellow flowers and assumed *sunflower*, but looking at Janice's photographs later (after I'd written about the flowers), I think they may be narcissus? Which is equally as pointed and funny a message from Hannibal.

Turrón de Jijona (Spanish soft nougat)
Menestra de Verduras (vegetable stew)

Queries about when Donald becomes the *plat du jour* will be cheerfully met with duck recipes in response.

teurgoule

Chapter Summary

A great deal of lying, a little bit of snooping, and a close shave. Will and Hannibal discuss family and motherhood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Your bouts of nocturnal somnambulism seem to have dropped off lately. That's good."

"Yeah, uh -" Will glances up from fiddling with the little set of glittery wire tabletop ornaments Noble Hills has seen fit to recently deposit into his ward in the spirit of the season. Artificial bouquets out, secular *ho ho ho*s front and centre.

The coil-shaped Christmas trees go *sproing* when pressed down upon, but Will should probably do the polite thing and at least look *vaguely* in the direction of one of his doctors when they're speaking to him.

When *Dr. Morgan-Moore* is speaking to him, anyway. The woman actually treats Will like an intelligent human being capable of making serious decisions for himself - unlike a certain *other* doctor currently on Will's medical team.

Dr. Morgan-Moore smiles at him patiently, comfortable on one of the ward's sofas as she studies the notes on Will's chart, apparently wholly unconcerned by Will slowly roaming the room around her as they talk.

Her attitude is appreciated; Will would rather work out his agitation that afternoon by poking and pacing about the ward in his slippers instead of turning his snappishness on Morgan-Moore. The omega doctor may be one of the better - if not best - doctors that Will has ever had in regards to his reproductive health (and that is both a compliment to her, and an insult to many of the rest). Too many of the other medical doctors in Will's past had been prone to histrionics about Will's habits, his restlessness, and/or his… *un-omega-like* qualities.

As a nice bonus, Morgan-Moore smells of expensive soap, summer flowers and fresh linens. Will has never been able to figure out if the scent is Morgan-Moore's natural scent or merely a mixture of neutral body-products on top of scent-blockers, but it's a calm, pleasant smell to be around. Like the omega who either wears or emits it.

Will gives a little coil-tree one last press-*sproing* before stepping away from the table it had been placed upon. Removing himself from temptation, wrapping his arms around himself to warm himself the way the afternoon sunshine coming in through the windows isn't.

“They’ve not completely stopped, but I’ve definitely woken up exactly where I was when I fell asleep more often lately. It’s been a relief.”

“For all of us, Mstr. Graham,” says Morgan-Moore, and, if Will had to read her for an official report, he’d claim she was being sincere. Giving Will an approving - surprisingly not patronising - smile. “You’re looking much more well-rested these days, and your blood pressure seems to be down in the normal range again.” Morgan-Moore glances down at the clipboard on her lap again to check something, pursing her lips at whatever she reads there. “I see Dr. Sutcliffe has ascribed this to your increased medication.” Will snorts. Loudly. “You disagree.”

“I’m sure you’ve got your own theories, doctor.”

Though she tactfully doesn’t say as much, Morgan-Moore *does*. Her gaze flickers, very deliberately, over to the curtained-over section of Will’s suite, to the nest she cannot see there but must know about from reading Will’s medical notes. The nest she’d recommended he build - and rest in - as a self-soothing exercise.

Will sighs, and just gets the topic over with. “*Yes*, I built a nest. Yes, I’ve been hanging out and sleeping in it every so often.” Leaning against the back of his OB-GYN’s seat - “Started doing that, and found myself down the corridor, confused, in the middle of the night less often. *Then* Sutcliffe upped my steroids.”

And everything had gone to hell again. Gotten all mixed-up in Will’s head.

Morgan-Moore taps the board on her lap thoughtfully with her pen. “Dr. Sutcliffe also noted an increase in aggression in your responses to him around that time as well.”

“Dr. Sutcliffe can be particularly aggravating,” Will says with the mildest form of bluntness he currently has the energy to manage. Before grudgingly adding, “And I’m not the most sunny-tempered patient at the best of times.”

A soft laugh (and no disagreement about Sutcliffe). “With that cherubic face of yours?”

Will’s answering smile is a self-deprecating one, reaching up with one hand to rub back and forth over the unusually long hair on his unshaven cheeks. It’s coarse now, against his palm. The stubble past prickling and grown into a thin, wiry bush of hair. “Wonder you can see it under the beard.”

A tactful *hm.* “I would strongly recommend you not try and give yourself a shave at the moment, Mstr. Graham,” Morgan-Moore advises him, professional once more. The leather of the sofa squeaks slightly as she adjusts herself in the seat. “Your visual neglect is significant enough you’d be very likely to cut yourself. If you need the services of a professional barber -”

Noble Hills would no doubt provide one for an exorbitant fee. Will’s not interested - and Hannibal had offered to help him with shaving on his visit the following day, anyway, if Will really cannot manage by himself. “A friend offered to give me a hand; it’s alright. Thanks.”

Something of an apology from Hannibal for having to take another night off from visiting Will in the hospital - as though that's something *anyone* has to apologise to Will about. God knows *Will* can name a good few places he'd rather be on a Tuesday night.

A nod from Morgan-Moore, moving on, "How's the nausea?"

"Manageable. Much rarer than it used to be, though if I smell something weird or I get too dizzy..." Will gestures, eloquent motion to finish his sentence: *he barfs.*

"You've put some of the weight back on that you lost," his OB-GYN muses, glancing between Will's chart and Will himself - very noticeably less gaunt than the last time she had given Will the good ol' *eye* up and down. "That was our main concern, at least in regards to the pregnancy, along with your lack of sleep."

"This where you tell me to keep up the good work?" Will jokes.

"Please do," says Morgan-Moore - kindly, but very much not joking. "I still don't want to prescribe you any new medication unless it proves necessary. Your body is exhausted enough trying to keep up with all the treatments for your encephalitis; it needs time to adjust."

"And Sutcliffe is concerned that benzos will affect the presentation of my encephalopathy," says Will, because he *has* looked at his own charts and inferred that issue between the lines, "causing a problem for his study."

Morgan-Moore sighs. (*Bullseye.*) "Your health - and your baby's - is our priority, Mstr. Graham. Study or not." She shifts in her seat again, and another gentle waft of summer flowers fills the air. (Missing any stress hormones from Will's line of questioning - so maybe the scent really *is* just her perfume.) "Anything else you'd like to mention? Any niggling concerns or symptoms that have been bothering you? Hallucinations?"

Nothing that Will would *like to mention.* Not before having a serious talk with Sutcliffe if things don't improve. Will has always had an active imagination; he can deal with the newer, temporary facets of it for a little while longer, giving his body time to adjust to all the shit his brain and his treatment is putting it through.

Will's nails bite into the skin of his bare arms, scratching over the gooseflesh. He's cold again. "Not that I'm aware of."

Even in the almost-darkness of Donald Sutcliffe's parlour, Hannibal's hand is steady as he pours a *digestif* into two snifter glasses. Donald's drinks cabinet is well-stocked - with its most expensive bottles displayed prominently at the fore -, and Hannibal, bidden *make yourself at home* whilst Donald removes the ramekins he had served their dessert in, had left

the dining room and snagged a bottle of Grand Marnier Cordon Rouge for their post-dinner drinks.

The selection is, of course, a pointed nod to the same liqueur that Hannibal had detected flavouring their (very obviously shop-bought) *crème brûlée* that night. And a strongly-flavoured enough drink to mask the taste of the small sachet of powder that Hannibal tips into Donald's glass, stirring the contents until they dissolve.

The dark room does the rest of the work for Hannibal in hiding his work, the deep velvet blanket of night broken only by a little moonlight through the window, the twinkling Christmas lights of Donald's neighbours across the road.

The neighbours are *quite* far across the road: the twinkling Christmas decorations only bring a slight red-green-gold shimmer to the curve of Hannibal's snifter, the light fading as it seeps into the alcohol within like a drowning firefly. Guttering and swallowed, a smooth wash of bitter orange heat over Hannibal's tongue.

The neighbours have CCTV. Hannibal had taken a taxi to Donald's house in Roland Park that night - picked up a few streets away from his own home - and kept his face away from the cameras' watchful eyes.

Donald, when he arrives, pauses on the threshold of the unlit parlour - and then promptly mistakes Hannibal's failure to switch on the lights for romantic seduction. A cocksure sway in his hips as he saunters across to Hannibal standing by the parlour window, accepting the glass Hannibal presses into his hand with a teasing flash of his omega fangs.

"Plotting terribly dramatic things in the dark, are we?"

Hannibal smiles, "Wouldn't you like to know?" and cups one palm around the nape of Donald's neck like the other curves around the full bottom of his snifter glass. One to warm the liqueur. Both to heat the blood, a flush travelling like a pale shadow down the column of Donald's bare throat.

Donald takes a too-large swallow of his drink, doubtless barely tasting it as his eyes lock with Hannibal's in the dark. Dying fireflies catch in the retroreflective layer of tissue behind his retinas, thin rings of gold blooming around the black expanse of his pupils.

Hannibal can very clearly envision closing his fingers about those little lights until they are crushed to a wet warm pulp in his fist. He bends his head to kiss over the throb of one of Donald's carotid arteries instead, acclimatising himself anew to the ever-increasing syrupiness of Donald's scent.

The *smell* of the omega - and, in particular, Donald's arousal - had choked the dinner table all night, wild figs and clary sage a poor accompaniment to Donald's attempts at French cuisine. The *hachis parmentier* that Hannibal's host had brought to the table had been, essentially, an overcooked shepherd's pie with - somehow - *under*cooked beef inside of it, and Donald's pleased little puff of scent when Hannibal had managed to choke down a few mouthfuls of the 'food' with a neutral expression had forced Hannibal into reaching for his glass at the time - an Alsatian pinot noir - to hide his grimace in the wine.

Overripe figs burst with juice over warm skin, melding with the orange-brandy-sugar already heavy on Hannibal's tongue. Tender flesh against the points of Hannibal's teeth, since Donald had opted for a button-up shirt that night cut in the omega style: collar almost invisible at the nape, neckline plunging low.

A caught breath, and another swallow of liqueur that moves Donald's throat beneath Hannibal's mouth like an invitation to bite. It feels like Hannibal has something thick sticking to the enamel of his teeth: a cloying sensation now, where once it had enticed him.

Fingers drag playfully down the side of Hannibal's ribs. "'Stars, hide your fires'."

Let not light see my black and deep desires.

Hannibal coaxes Donald into drinking most of the Grand Marnier between bitter orange-flavoured kisses, and seals the deal by throwing back the remains of his own *digestif* in a show of ardour. Suggesting the impatient desire to move things elsewhere so that Donald, swept up in it all and laughing, knocks back his own glass and swallows the last dregs inside of it in one long swallow.

They go to Donald's bedroom, and then the fumbling in the darkness truly begins. Some of it is the drugs in Donald's system making his fingers clumsy, but much more of it is simply that Hannibal is bored. Hannibal is bored and has been bored with Donald ever since the *last* time he and the other man had broken up, utterly uninterested in the gossip going around the hospital at that time.

Donald had been looking for the social advancement of an alpha mate back then, finding the hunt preferable to continuing his fling with what the medically-inclined anglophone world liked to 'jokingly' refer to as a *B-positive* - a beta with alpha-beta parents, occasionally called a delta by those interested in tertiary genders/sub-dynamics. The term is a mocking one: *B-positive/*delta individuals are regarded by society as either the 'superior' type of beta, as their worth is increased only by their potential ability to have biological alpha children, or as betas with aspirations to *be* alphas, hubristic and acting above their 'allotted station' in life.

As far as Hannibal is aware, Donald had never referred to Hannibal using the B-positive epithet either to Hannibal's face or behind his back - but Donald, at the time, had made no secret of the fact that he had considered omegas who chose to enter into permanent, monogamous relationships with betas to be *settling.*

Rather tired of the dull sex and duller conversation that Donald had provided, Hannibal had *settled* on breaking up with Donald as swiftly and as amicably as possible whilst convincing the other man that it had been his own idea all along. And then using his subsequent aura of tragic mystique to have a brief and heated fling over the following long weekend with a visiting anaesthetist lecturing at the hospital university.

(Quite obviously, Donald's attempts to find an alpha to mate with after their parting had failed, though it would be rude for Hannibal to join in with the - still continuing - speculation in his extended social circle as to why that could be. Including theories on why - *beta* - Hannibal appears to be a viable romantic option for Donald again, Hannibal's imminent pre-provided offspring and all.)

“You smell so *good,”* Donald moans when they are both finally naked, two bodies rubbing against each other atop the sheets on Donald’s bed. His hands paw ineffectually at the back of Hannibal’s head, mussing up Hannibal’s hair and failing to hold Hannibal’s mouth in place against his nipples, over the sensitive wings of his collarbone, at the scent glands at his throat.

Hannibal flips him over so Donald can slur his pleasure into the pillows instead, and mounts him from behind. Condom airtight. Actions almost perfunctory, Hannibal’s mind largely disconnected from the motions required to bring himself and his partner of the moment to orgasm, especially with Donald trying to ineffectually thrust his hips back onto Hannibal’s cock.

Mentally, Hannibal takes a long, slow stroll through the rooms on the ground floor of his own home. He has a delivery of pine trees due at lunchtime the following day, and each will have their place, their decoration, to match each room’s theme for the holidays. Vintage velvet lace with candy canes and dried clementines. Pheasant feathers, origami flowers and deep red roses in full bloom. Ribbons and ribbons of translucent organza around silver gilt antique baubles, silver snowflakes from Christofle, and Swarovski crystal.

This year, more than any other that has come before it since his arrival in Baltimore, Hannibal’s home must look like a dream this Christmas. A vision of splendour, plenty and warmth. An offering of shelter and a comfort from the winter darkness. Full of sweet and beautiful things for a family to enjoy.

...And very probably, Hannibal sighs as Donald cries his release under him and spills onto the bedcovers, it will all have to be dog-proofed.

A little exertion of mind over matter - a quick internal sidestep from plans of Christmas trees to the scent-memory of musk, spiced smoke and pines against Will Graham’s bare skin, storm-tossed hair tight in Hannibal’s grasping fist - and Hannibal orgasms as well, carefully withdrawing from Donald’s body to avoid any more accidental condom breakages or spills. Hannibal would like to avoid leaving as much genetic evidence of his presence in Donald’s house and on the omega’s person as is possible - and so, after tying-off the condom, bags it to take away with him.

Donald offers no commentary. Sex, orgasm and Hannibal’s little sachet in his *digestif* have plunged Donald straight into a deep and likely dreamless sleep, face-down in his own damp spot.

Hannibal uses Donald’s en-suite to clean himself up before getting dressed again. He had agreed to suffer Donald’s rather poor attempts at wining and dining him simply for extended access to the other doctor’s home, at full liberty to rifle through Donald’s belongings with the guarantee Donald will not stir and find Hannibal at his computer or going through his papers.

As it has been ever since their days as interns, Donald’s only diary is a digital one. He keeps it for forward planning rather than journalling, scheduling professional work and/or academic events. It contains very little in the way of personal entries, and then only birthdays and anniversaries for Donald to remember. Nothing, Hannibal makes sure as he clicks back and forth through the days, for the week before or that night for dinners scheduled with Hannibal.

There is no mention of Hannibal in Donald's papers either except in the abstract - in Donald's notes on Will, mentioned only as the unnamed biological sire of Donald's unnamed patient's pregnancy.

Donald's neighbours will not remember Hannibal. Hannibal's neighbours will very likely not remember Donald. If Hannibal washes the dishes from the dinner tonight - and he will -, there will be next to no evidence at all of his presence in Donald Sutcliffe's current life except as an old, distant friend who had called in an equally old favour to get a speedy MRI for Will. Even should forensics investigate Donald's house more thoroughly, after the laundry is done, Hannibal will merely be an old, distant friend that Donald Sutcliffe has briefly reconnected with, Donald thanked for his tender and attentive care of Will Graham with a few dinners here and there. All perfectly innocent. Easily explained.

If Donald says anything -

Well. Hannibal had planned and rather expected Donald to have *already* said or at least implied something about the developments in his relationship with Hannibal to Will, but perhaps Donald has been waiting for the right time before driving that particular dagger in. Presenting sexual consummation to his ailing patient as a sadistic *fait accompli.*

As for Donald mentioning Hannibal to other people… Donald likes his secrets; they give him something to lord over others. And he knows that Hannibal would - at the very least - drop him with public and humiliating immediacy should he descend to the crassness of bragging about his 'conquest', especially at this nascent stage of their affair.

No, Donald will very likely not have spoken about Hannibal to others, but, if he has, it will still be easy to paint those words as delusional and/or wishful thinking. The world will know quite soon, after all, how besotted Hannibal is with Will Graham - and *only* Will Graham. Mother of his child, equal of his mind. There is no competition.

With a phoenix to adore, why would anyone choose a peahen?

Beverly makes it on the Wednesday following their initial plans, rattled and rattling - she's brought her scrabble board and tiles along with a great deal of chocolate-covered sweet-and-spicy lebkuchen. Announcing her intentions to kick Will's ass at the game. (The lebkuchen are there to sweeten Will's defeat.)

When they settle down to play, it quickly becomes apparent that Will needs help in accurately placing his tiles on the board. Spatial neglect is still a major symptom of the state of Will's fucked-up brain and, though he can read the scrabble board fairly accurately, turning his head without even thinking about it too much to compensate for his affected vision, the tiles he puts down are 'a little wonky' - as Beverly delicately puts it.

She offers to help, and so Beverly's hands guide Will through their game as unobtrusively as Will thinks anyone could manage, nudging Will's askew tiles into place once Will has tried to place them himself and verbally stated where he meant them to go.

It slows down the game, but it gives them both plenty of time to plough their way through the lebkuchen. And for Will, mouth full of chocolate, honey and cloves, to study his opponent as Beverly ponders through her own turn with the board. Noting the semi-permanent furrow in Beverly's brow. The deep, tense lines creased around her mouth, shadows smudged into her features like the vanillic *charcoal* that has embittered the sweeter notes of her natural scent.

How *appallingly bad* Beverly is doing at scrabble, setting down a paltry *man* off the *M* of Will's *axiom.*

That's it. Will swallows his lebkuchen. "Out with it," he says.

Beverly is caught off-guard, her hand freezing in the middle of rummaging in the tile bag like a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar right before dinner. "Huh?"

"*I* can get away with being distracted due to literally having an inflamed brain," Will challenges her flatly. "What's your excuse?"

Beverly opens her mouth, and, by the look on her face, Will can already hear her half-hearted bullshit. "I -"

"Nope." Will lightly pats the table with the flat of his hand, cutting short the crap before it can begin. "Bev, you haven't laid down a word longer than three tiles all game."

All of Beverly's body language is saying that she's stressed - and Will really doesn't think it's because Beverly can't *spell.* Her mind is elsewhere: not in the hospital with Will, and not on the game. Her distant eyes redder than they should be under the lights.

"My tiles suck," Beverly tries - and then sighs when Will gives her another unimpressed look. Her shoulders slump, the chair she's sitting creaking as she leans her weight back into the seat. "Sorry."

Will grabs himself another lebkuchen before silently pushing the box her way, letting Beverly take some strength from the snap of another spicy cookie between her teeth. Preoccupied alphas often like to *literally* chew on something as they metaphorically chew things out. (And better it be a cookie than a person.)

"...It's the case Jack dragged us out to in Maine," Beverly says eventually, her chosen unfortunate lebkuchen ground down between her fangs and molars before finally being swallowed. Rubbing away the crumbs and melted chocolate on her fingertips - "The family killing."

Will closes his eyes, feeling the last shreds of levity drain out of him. *I started this.* "Yeah?"

"They were all just… *sitting* there. Still. At the dinner table."

"How many?"

“Four,” says Beverly, and Will can already see their shadows against the insides of his eyelids. A family at the table becoming food for flies. “The Turners: alpha male, omega female, two children. Young. The father and kids were shot in the head from behind - simultaneously, we think. Execution style. The mother, from in front. All the food had gone mouldy and was covered in blood spray and bugs.”

“Multiple unsubs,” Will concludes, and has to open his eyes again to shoo away those shadows, chasing away the imaginary smell of rot with another bite of lebkuchen. The taste of cloves on his tongue settles the churning of his stomach. “A home invasion gone bad?”

“No signs of forced entry. They came during the day, when dinner was being served. So they were probably let in by the front door.”

“Invited then?”

“There was only one empty seat at the table,” says Beverly, which rules out the group of unsubs - at least in their entirety - being expected guests. “At the head. The place was set, but there was no food. And someone must’ve been sitting there. The omega, Karen Turner -” Will eyeballs Beverly pointedly and immediately wishes he hadn’t when he sees the fresh, open bullet wound that *cannot* be there in the middle of her forehead - “don’t give me that look, the names are already on *Tattlecrime -,* was facing in that direction when she was shot.”

The lebkuchen tastes like ash in Will’s mouth. *It’s not real.* “Looking at the guest of honour.”

Beverly nods, apparently unconcerned with the faint trickle of blood now dripping down her forehead, a bead of it sliding over the bridge of her nose. Her eyes are going glassy with death, even as Will can still smell the stress in her very *living* alpha scent.

It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s not real -

Will drops his cookie, fixing her gaze resolutely over Beverly’s shoulder rather than on her face. “Is it the children?” he asks abruptly.

“What?”

“The children,” says Will. Out of the corner of his eyes, he can still see the thin trail of blood as it spreads down the side of Beverly’s nose. It’s going brown already. “Are they what’s still troubling you? Not that dead kids aren’t going to trouble most people, but you’re pretty good at compartmentalising.”

Beverly jerks in her seat and makes an aborted inarticulate sound, wincing with self-realisation. “*Ahhh- sorry,* Will. The pregnant guy in hospital does *not* want to hear about work. Especially when work is dead kids. Which I just mentioned again, *shit*.”

Will *has* to snort at Beverly’s suffering even as his hand falls protectively to his abdomen, the very faint curve below the layers of fabric gathered there. He hadn’t been thinking about that connection until Beverly had made it, and now -

Now, Will can see the chagrined twist in Beverly's expression, and the reflection of his own imagined death in the deathly pallor his burning brain has filmed over her eyes. "If I didn't want to know what was bothering you, I wouldn't have asked. And I asked." Beverly opens her mouth to speak, and Will cuts her off at the head. "*Even* if it's work. Figured you would have appreciated the reprieve from combing through the fabrics from the Pagoda tableau for the third time anyway."

"*Fourth,*" Beverly grumbles, correcting him. "It's the fourth time now, when I can squeeze in the time for it between analysis of the scene in Maine."

And still nothing new to show for it, judging by her expression. Will is about to ask if Zeller and Price have been subjected to going over the endless sprigs of lavender from the Pagoda for a fourth time as well when Beverly speaks again.

"Jack thinks-" She hesitates, then starts again, gesturing with her hands. Testing a theory on him. "The bullets that took out the father and kids, the shooters were firing from low to high. Angled cranial impacts, termination points in upper sections of the wall and ceiling."

"The shooters were crouching?" Will frowns, already shaking his head as his question prompts a vision of the scene again in his mind's eye. A stereotypical Sunday pot roast gone terribly, terribly wrong. Shadows menaced by shadows, and the table splattered with red. "No, that doesn't seem right. They were confident enough to stroll into the house in the middle of the day. Kept the family in their seats with threats of violence. They'd stay standing."

"All the victims have defensive wounds except for Karen Turner. And yet she was the only one who was facing her killer. Who saw what was coming."

"And accepted it." She hadn't fought back.

Beverly's lips press into an even thinner line, deeper creases making a home for themselves at the corner of her mouth. "If she was killed last as we think she was, she saw her mate and two of her children die. How does anyone *accept* that?"

"They have to forgive the ones who did it," Will says quietly, and has to consciously relax the grip of his hand over his belly, his nails biting through the material of the sweater and t-shirt he had pulled on that day.

What would induce him to forgive someone shooting his growing child in the womb? Dragging Abigail in front of him, and shooting her in the head?

"Big ask," says Beverly.

"Depends on the victim," says Will. "Depends on the perpetrator."

The only thing that could make *Will* forgive someone for killing his child would be an equal or greater love, and Will doesn't have anyone like that. Is too selfish for that. Karen Turner, on the other hand -

"...You said Karen Turner saw her mate and *two of* her children die," Will says, and dares another glance between Beverly's eyes. The rusted-over bullet wound still sitting there, its scabbed edges crinkling with the movement of her brows. "Implying more than two?"

Beverly nods shortly. "The Turners had a third child, Jesse. A son, still unpresented in the records. He disappeared last year. Last confirmed sighting had him boarding an RV at a rest area on route forty-seven. Possible runaway, probable abduction."

"Or both."

"Maybe. There were plenty of tips, but none bore fruit."

Will sighs, and it feels like it hollows out the inside of his chest. Three shots ring out simultaneously in the cavern of his head with a spike of pain, shadows slumping over an unseen table and spilling lakes of red. "Karen Turner forgave the people who killed her family, forgave the one who killed *her*, because her killer was family as well. Because he was her prodigal son, and she was his mother."

"Jack thinks Jesse came home," Beverly as good as confirms, every inch of her face and body screaming that she doesn't want to believe that truth. That a missing child can return home only to oversee the murder of his parents and siblings.

"And brought a new family with him," Will says grimly.

Something for Beverly to take back to Jack, if she's inclined: Will agrees with Jack's theory. Talking about it seems to offer Beverly some sort of comfort anyway; the load very obviously lightened on her shoulders as her body relaxes, at last, into its seat.

Maybe Beverly had just needed to talk about it with *someone*, airing out the cage of demons in her skull before it got too crowded between the bars. Price and Zeller had probably been too busy and/or burnt-out themselves to handle rehashing the conversation, and the FBI psychiatrists are too- too *official* when all someone wants is a friendly ear. Jack is a superior agent rather than a friend, and Beverly's boyfriend (*Saul,* as Will has gathered from tidbits gleaned in conversation with Beverly here and there) is a civilian whom Beverly cannot discuss the details of an active case with.

Will sits, and Will listens, and Will offers his own input. And he pushes lebkuchen at Beverly - when he isn't eating them himself - until all the cookies are gone and Beverly's living, breathing corpse sitting across the table from Will has taken on a waxy sheen.

They go back to playing scrabble, and Will lets Beverly take over putting his tiles in place for him entirely because her fingers, when they brush against his now, have gone stiff and cold. Will's head is so heavy on his neck it feels like he might topple over onto the table in front of him, and he directs Beverly through two and a half games with the heels of his palms grinding into his own eyeballs. Wishing he could grind in deep enough, hard enough, that he could push all the pain (push his own *stupid, fucking inflamed brain*) out of his skull.

And yet, even with the pain, even with Beverly's physical help and her attention now focused on the scrabble board, Will still wins those two games. And looks set to win their third.

Beverly's so indignant about it all Will knows she's actually trying to beat him, and thus he feels no guilt whatsoever in directing her into laying out another handful of tiles on the board that will rack him up an incredibly hefty point score.

"*Bequeathes?"* Beverly complains, guessing out the word Will is having her spell out as Will hands her his tiles to lay out one by one. "No, *bequeathed.* Because of course you *need* that *D* when a perfectly good *S* would do and you're putting your latest monstrosity across two triple-word tiles and my hard-won *eat*. Have you no shame?"

Will has not. "There isn't an *E* after the *H* in *bequeaths,"* he says, and manages to restrain his tired grin until Beverly kicks him in the shin under the table. He reaches to grab himself some painkillers. "You're just mad about *soupy.*"

"I'd been *winning!"* Their last game.

"Key words there being *had been,*" Will points out with a certain wicked streak of glee, laughing at Beverly's answering *huff.* His smile is still stretched across his lips when he recognises the figure standing in the doorway to his suite, too familiar with the space now to need to knock. "Hannibal."

Hannibal is his usual smartly-dressed self that evening, a study in contrasts to Beverly's post-work dressed-down look and Will's pyjama pants and sweater ensemble. Dr. Suit: a brown-and-blue plaid blazer and waistcoat under his overcoat, black slacks and a tie that probably has an official artist's title attached to it like 'psychedelic trip #39, exploration in brown.'

He nods to them both. "Good evening, Will. Ms. Katz."

"Hey," Beverly greets him easily in return, speaking up as Will has his mouth full with water and pills. "Is it that late already?" A quick glance down at her watch, and then back up at Will. "Eesh! I gotta go after we finish this." She frowns down at the scrabble board between them, doing a quick comparison between Will's contributions to their game and her own. "...Though maybe I should give up while the going's good."

"The going was *never* good," Will drawls after swallowing, shifting his legs under the table when Beverly tries to kick him again. Between blinks, she almost looks alive to him again. Moving too quickly for death to catch her.

"Let a girl have a *little* denial to salve her bruised pride, Graham, would you?"

Hannibal, taking up position just behind Will's chair, places his hand on the back of Will's seat so he can lean over Will to examine the paper on the table that lists the running totals of Will and Beverly's scores. A warm presence right between Will's shoulder-blades, his voice warm with laughter. "I'm afraid a heavier dose of denial might be required to ignore the significant difference in your scores so far, Ms. Katz."

Beverly clutches her heart, melodramatically wounded. "You come into *my* house, on the day my daughter is to be married -" Will turns the paper around to show her their scores, side by side. His, several hundred points ahead of hers. "I respectfully forfeit, and will now depart with my tail tucked firmly between my legs."

Will snorts, and Beverly's fangs flash when she grins.

“You need a hand with cleaning up or-”

Will waves her off, already plucking at the tiles to return them to their bag. “Nah, I got it.”

“I’ll leave it here with you then. Next time I see you though, Graham…” Beverly pushes herself up to her feet, gesturing theatrically back-and-forth between the two of them. “You. Me. Rematch.”

“You know where to find me.”

Beverly leaves, and Hannibal slides into her recently vacated chair to assist Will in clearing the table of scrabble tiles, board, and cookie crumbs.

“It seems you are a truly pitiless scrabble opponent.”

“Beverly was a bit preoccupied,” Will demurs, concentrating on picking up the tiles one by one so they don’t feel so much like they’re all slipping through his fingers. Beverly might’ve fared better against him with her head more consistently in the game. “Case at work.”

Hannibal hums. “The Ripper tableau in Patterson Park?”

“That’s old news now,” says Will, because it is. Over two weeks ago: an abnormal, and quite worrying, length of time between kills for one of the Ripper's sounders.

(*Just* over two weeks ago: a very short span of time for Will to have had his life so thoroughly derailed, shaken, and turned upside-down.)

Jack Crawford is probably wearing a hole in his office carpet back at Quantico with all his circling, wondering if there’s a Ripper tableau out there *somewhere* that people have somehow missed or failed to call in.

“The family killing in Maine,” Will clarifies when he sees the slight *purse* of Hannibal’s lips. Hannibal is just as pettish as Will can be when he feels left out of the loop. “The Turners.”

“Ah, ‘the dinner of death’,” says Hannibal sagely - which really sounds like he’s quoting something.

Will frowns, anticipating the disappointment he knows he’s about to feel when Hannibal reveals his source material:

“*Tattlecrime,* I’m afraid.” Laughter dances as gold flecks in Hannibal’s eyes. He’d read Will’s mind, apparently.

Will huffs, reaching out to scrape together a whole heap of tiles with an ungainly clatter. “If Lounds printed that crap, it wouldn’t even be fit for toilet paper.”

“She has some skill with the camera,” says Hannibal - which is, in Will’s opinion, a statement perfectly worthy of a good ol’ stink-eye. “Her photographs linger in the mind’s eye.”

“‘Skill’ is *not* the word I’d use for it,” Will gripes, and swipes the tile-heap to the edge of the table and over, toppling the tiles down into the open mouth of their bag below.

A few tiles escape to *plink* onto the hospital floor instead, and Hannibal bends gracefully to retrieve them. An *A,* an *M,* a runaway *S* and *H* together, each tucked into Will’s palm like a vow.

“All images tell their own tale,” Hannibal says as Will’s fingers close over the tiles, one by one. “A blood-splattered table is an evocative one, empty of everything but the ghosts still sat in its seats. Echoing and re-echoing through the camera’s lens the last scene enacted there.”

“A picture says a thousand words,” Will mutters, and dumps the tiles in their bag with the rest to sulkily pull the drawstring neck closed as Hannibal folds up the game board. Brushes away a few more cookie crumbs before sliding it into its box. “Doesn’t mean they’re truthful ones.”

“Difficult to avoid all embellishment when every reconstruction will colour the scene in a different light.”

“Facts don’t lie, but truths can conflict,” Will acknowledges. Grudgingly.

“Rare there’s a death without conflict,” Hannibal observes, his gaze distant. Wandering back in his mind, most likely, to his busy days and hectic nights long ago in the Emergency Room. “Even if the only conflict is against one’s own mortality.”

“‘Rage, rage, against the dying of the light’?”

The bag of tiles goes back in the box as well and Hannibal sets it to the side, clearing the table. “One could assume a little wrath. Your average American family sat down to their average American pot roast. Shot dead over their own meal. It’s taboo,” Hannibal muses. “A symbol of broken protection.”

“Home invasions are just that,” Will points out, leaning back in his seat. “*Invasions.*”

Hannibal promptly leans in over the table to close the distance again, his forearms flat on the tabletop between them. “Consider the word *companion.* Its Latin root literally means ‘a person with whom we share bread’.”

It’s late enough the lights are on inside Will’s hospital room, turning the window beside them into a black mirror. Showing their reflections across from one another, side by side with themselves.

The pupils of Hannibal’s eyes are vast enough, dark enough, focused enough, that Will can see nothing but himself when he looks up and catches Hannibal’s gaze directly - and thus finds himself reflected on most of his sides, pinned in place by his own eyes, his own limbs, in a funhouse of dark mirrors. His breath catches, pinned up for a moment as well and then -

Hannibal blinks. Smiling warmly, with a nod to the ever-present thermal bag by their feet. The daily evening offering. “To share a meal with someone is to make something other than

an enemy of them, however temporarily. Offering them refuge under your roof."

"...No swords at the dinner table," Will says a little numbly - and thankfully *before* he can say something twice as dumb along the lines of *this isn't* your *roof.* (Hannibal has certainly made himself at home enough in Will's hospital suite - which Hannibal is paying for - that it might as well be.)

"Not during the breaking of bread," Hannibal says, rising momentarily to his feet to grab his bag and their dinner for the evening - and nearly giving Will a heart attack when he stretches out his neck as he bends over so he can press his face to Will's bare throat, casually scenting the omega.

His breath and lips are warm and ticklish against Will's skin, the sensitive throb of Will's scent glands. Will shivers then locks up entirely.

"I forget how much you soak up the scent of your environment. You smell like Christmas."

For all Will has frozen in his seat, it feels like his cheeks - his ears, God, his *throat* - are burning. "...Beverly brought lebkuchen."

"I hope you left room for your dinner," Hannibal mock-chides him, and brushes a feather-light kiss to Will's jawline that feels as nonchalant as his scenting before he sits down again. Presenting and uncovering their bowls of food with his usual graceful aplomb. "Crespelle with sausage and swiss chard."

It smells *amazing,* tomato and herbs and melted cheese, and Will is grateful for it as a distraction. His stomach rumbles agreement, drawing some heat away from his still-flushed face.

Good friends randomly scent each other all the time as well as family and long-term lovers. It's a casual, common display of affection. Or so Will has been told. The last person who had casually scented him that intimately without some kind of other - usually sexual - intent behind it had been his father, and it's been a *good* few years since then.

If Hannibal isn't going to make a big deal about just randomly scenting Will… well, neither is Will. Apparently they're good friends now. They're certainly repeat lovers.

Will should be flattered that Hannibal considers them close enough to do such a thing. Will *is* flattered Hannibal considers them close enough to do such a thing, and that Hannibal has made things simple for *both* of them by not making a big deal about it. Will just has to claw his heart back down from where it has leapt up into his throat first, and *then,* perhaps, the flattery will settle down into a nice gentle warmth in his chest rather than the inferno in his face.

(Are his ears still scarlet? A quick glance in the window beside him shows Will his ears are still scarlet, so he reaches up to cover their tips with a stray lock of hair.)

Will picks up a fork to investigate his meal - some kind of Italian cuisine? Crispy rolls made of carbohydrates oozing a meat-and-tomato filling. Layers of béchamel sauce and grated

cheese on top.

“You’re saying words, and I’m seeing cannelloni.”

“It is similar in principle,” says Hannibal as he pours out their drinks from a flask - apparently pre-prepared ahead of time with little fleck of lemon rind, *Jesus Christ, Hannibal* -, “but the pasta has been replaced with thin Italian crêpes - the *crespelle.* Singular, *crespella.*”

…Lasagne pancakes.

Will has no idea what the difference is between a French crêpe and an Italian crespella, but is happy to find whatever room has been left by the lebkuchen in his stomach in the process of discovering that answer.

The crespelle are crispy on the outside from baking, crunching against the side of Will’s fork, whilst their insides are soft and molten, soaking up all the herb-flecked sauce coating their sausage meat filling. All of it lovingly draped in that silky béchamel sauce, that fancy grated cheese that has *just* gone a little crispy at its edges in the *very best way.*

“Please make this for me until I die,” Will says halfway through their meal, not entirely joking.

“No more deaths at the table this week,” Hannibal jests back in the same vein - though his joke fails to land, mired in the not-so-distant memory his words invoke once more in Will.

Will’s fork pauses for a moment against the lip of his dish. His lower lip dragged between his teeth, licked clean of the sauce from his meal. “...It looks likely that that family were killed by one of their own. A runaway, returned home with new friends.”

Hannibal pauses eating as well, acknowledging the weightier topic with a more sombre tone. “It is not as uncommon as one might wish for children to enact violence on their parents and siblings.”

“As a child though?”

Hannibal’s silence answers the question: *yes, even as children.*

Will frowns, and the reaction is noted by Hannibal’s ever-observant eyes.

“The thought disturbs you.”

“It’s a disturbing thought,” Will says and sets down his fork entirely. “The mother looked her son in the eye at the table and he shot her dead.”

Hannibal’s appetite seems untroubled, and he takes another mouthful of his meal, chewing and swallowing before responding. Reaching out to idly swirl the little specks of lemon rind in his cup: “‘Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children’.”

“Someone had a grudge against God,” Will says broodingly, but Hannibal only smiles into his cup.

“Tell me about your mother.”

Will’s eyes narrow. “That’s some lazy psychiatry, *Dr. Lecter.* Low hanging fruit.”

“I suspect that fruit is on a high branch, very difficult to reach.”

“So’s my mother,” Will says flatly. How long has Hannibal been *suspecting* that? “I barely knew her.”

Hannibal hums. “An interesting place to start.”

Will shoots him a dour look, picking up his fork again to stab once more into his meal. “Tell me about *your* mother. Let’s start there. *Quid pro quo*.”

Hannibal remains undaunted by Will’s display of bad-temperedness - in fact, his lips twitch back from his teeth in a brief smile. *Amused,* the asshole. “Both my parents died when I was very young. The proverbial orphan until I was adopted by my Uncle Robertas when I was 16.”

…And now *Will* feels like the asshole. No wonder Hannibal seems to feel so strongly about family, and had been so cold when he’d believed Will had suggested he might abandon their child.

Will sighs. “...You have orphan in common with Abigail Hobbs.”

“I think we’ll discover you and I have a great deal in common with Abigail,” says Hannibal. “She’s already demonstrated an aptitude for the psychological.” He waits until Will takes another bite of dinner, before adding, expectantly, “*Quid pro quo.*”

Will does his best not to choke, not expecting the quick response. He *still* doesn’t want to discuss his mother. (Anyway, in the little time Will had known her, Arielle Graham had never much liked being *discussed.*) So Will finishes his mouthful and diverts instead. “There’s something so foreign about family. Like an ill-fitting suit. Never connected to the concept.”

“You created a family for yourself,” Hannibal says gently. His eyes warming as they drop down the length of Will’s torso that he can see, the lip of the tabletop currently obscuring his view of Will’s abdomen. “Are creating an addition to it now.”

“I created a pack of strays,” Will says dismissively, reaching out for his drink to clear the thickness - not entirely caused by sauce - clogging up his throat. “Thanks for everything you’ve done for them again, by the way. I check in on them every so often with the camera. They seem to be enjoying themselves at the kennel you found for them.”

Hannibal dips his head graciously in acknowledgement - before correcting him. “I was referring to Abigail Hobbs.”

An immediate reminder: Abigail trembling, weeping, in Will's arms, looking for comfort and protection from the world gone mad around her. A pale, blue-eyed brunette omega, her scent sweet and wild… She could be Will's. She could be.

(It would be an easy mistake for anyone to make.)

"What grudge was Mrs. Turner's killer harbouring against her?" Hannibal asks. Ever-interested in humanity's rage against authority, the fantastical crisis point where the falling angel meets the rising ape.

"Motherhood," says Will. A point made of Karen Turner's death by making it the last.

"Not motherhood," Hannibal suggests, "a perversion of it." With a curious eye on the way Will's fingers tighten around his cup: "Do you fear meeting a similar fate at the hands of our own child one day?"

Will's lips thin. In the window-mirror beside him, his reflection turns to him in his reflected seat, bleeding bullet-hole like a perverted bindi on his forehead.

Death smiles at Will with Will's own face now instead of Beverly's, dried brown flakes of blood showering down into Will's cup. Turning the pale yellow liquid inside pink.

Will lifts it to his mouth to drink anyway. If he closes his eyes, he can't taste the iron. Lemon and honey sweet on his lips. "If I've fucked up badly enough in raising them that they want to kill me, maybe I'd deserve it."

Across the table, Hannibal tilts his head - studying him, Will realises. "An endorsement of matricide?" No trace of condemnation in his voice.

"Wisdom once ruled in favour of Orestes."

"The man who killed his mother for killing his father for killing their daughter." Hannibal huffs a soft laugh. "All as the gods in all their caprice demanded. Returning us, once more, to the heavens."

"Your issues with divine authority have been noted," Will says dryly, before sobering once more. "...No-one wants their own child to hate them. I don't want Abigail to hate me either."

"She doesn't," Hannibal tells him. Then, more firmly as he catches Will's gaze dropping broodingly to his own navel, "They won't."

Where does Hannibal get that confidence from? So sure in himself it seems like the universe has no other choice but to listen to him and act accordingly.

Like the universe could be so simple if Will would only close his eyes to complications and focus solely on what Hannibal has to say.

Will lowers one hand to his abdomen beneath the table, the slowly expanding swell of his womb. Smiling, a little wanly, "Should I be expecting our little tadpole to inherit your apparent clairvoyant gifts?"

Hannibal's answering smile is a crooked one. "I believe it's customary to hand prophecies down the bloodline rather than prophetic gifts. Cassandras rarely meet happy ends."

Cassie Boyle certainly hadn't.

Will goes back to his crespelle before they go completely cold, filling up the hollow spaces inside of him with the Italian comfort food. Hannibal finishes several bites ahead of him, and seems only mildly surprised when Will passes on dessert. For now.

"You promised me a shave," Will says, fingers and thumb rasping over the- the burgeoning *beard,* there's no other word to describe it, growing on his own jawline. Rough, itchy - the hair is much longer than Will would like it, but his hands had shaken so badly just that morning when he'd tried to trim some of the growth back he'd cut himself with a safety razor.

The nick throbs now, after dinner and under the bathroom lights with Hannibal, the edges of the scab examined as Will is instructed to tilt his head for the doctor's critical eye. A small cut below the curve of his jaw, near the pulse by his ear.

Hannibal has a straight razor. The shine on its bare edge makes Will swallow convulsively even with the blade still lying on the bathroom countertop, his heart pounding in his ears as he leans back against the cool porcelain of the sink.

"The last time someone did this for me, I was barely old enough *to* grow a beard."

"A pity," says Hannibal. Somehow making even whisking up soap lather in a hospital mug look like an artform with the smooth, elegant motions of his wrist. "It can be quite soothing to allow a skilled barber to give you a hot shave every once in a while."

Will swallows again, still focused on Hannibal's wristbone - the point of it, the intimate sliver of skin between hand and cuff where Hannibal still hasn't pushed back his sleeve. The smell of the warm, lathering soap: something Hannibal had brought from home, the woodsy scent that had lurked in the en-suite to Hannibal's bedroom, part of Hannibal's projected scent to the world. "Is that what this is?"

"A very poor imitation, I'm afraid," says Hannibal, smiling at Will's touch to the back of his hand, stilling his own hand for Will's fingers to slide up under his cuff, lingering over his pulse, his scent gland. He has such *strength* in his forearm, Will is the one left shivering. "I assumed you would prefer something simple."

"I do," Will says, and carefully, crisply, removes his fingers from the inside of Hannibal's sleeve to fold the sleeve back to the other man's elbow. Lines neat as he can make them, even with Will's own sweater's sleeves slipping over his wrists. "I mean- I would."

Hannibal offers him his other arm as well, to do the same on the other side. "One day, perhaps."

"In the distant future. It takes me a fortnight to grow what you get by five o' clock." Will sighs. Recalculates as he rolls up Hannibal's other sleeve, factoring pregnancy hormones into

the biological equation, the inevitable slowing in the growth of his body hair. “Longer, maybe, now.”

Hannibal hums, waiting until Will has finished before he sets the hospital mug down, reaching up with both hands free to frame Will’s face between them. Thumbs rubbing back and forth over the bristles by Will’s mouth, catching occasionally on the soft damp corners of Will’s lips. “Should we shave it all off?”

Will makes a face, unintentionally pursing his lips against the print of a passing thumb. The digit presses for a moment against the swell like a seal of warm wax, stamped into place with an accidental kiss. “Without *any* sort of beard, I’ll look barely any older than the baby.”

Hannibal’s own mouth quirks - apparently amused by the notion. “But the stubble won’t itch,” he says reasonably. Will grimaces even more pointedly. “It can’t be that bad.”

“I had to *grow* a beard just so people would stop cooing at me.” Hannibal huffs out another almost-laugh and Will can’t help the indignant little rolling *chirp* that launches itself up out of his throat. “I was in the NOPD!”

Hannibal only smiles at him, all swimming honey in the rich red-brown warmth of his eyes as he looks fondly down at Will. Doing something *annoyingly* nice with his fingers behind Will’s ears, tugging through the curls of Will’s hair just a little, nails scritching pleasantly at the tender spots of Will’s scalp.

Will grumbles inarticulately. All that woodsy soap smell is up his nose, the faint silver spice of Hannibal’s cologne at Hannibal’s wrists so close to Will’s face. “...Ah, what the hell.” He lifts his chin, leaning back into the gentle scritching and offering Hannibal the expanse of his bare throat. “Have at it.” His stubble will grow back eventually.

Will would like to say he remains present in more than body for what follows after, but his mind drifts away from him in pieces. A blink - soap bubbles in the air and thick creamy lather applied with a badger bristle brush on his cheeks. Blinking again - a fleck of white caught in the hairs on Hannibal’s arm. *Shhh...* A dream of warm, steamy woods in the sunlight after a morning of summer rain.

In the warm living space behind his closed eyes Will can smell the undergrowth, the twigs that crack under his feet, the bushes and branches that snag and scratch at his palms. Swaying through the sharp keen slices of sunlight between the trees and clouds, in the open glades. A stream bubbles somewhere, flicking Will’s own skin with droplets of water.

In the hospital bathroom, the monster that now has Hannibal's face for its own shaves Will’s cheeks and throat clean of hair with its own bladed claws. A slow, confident glide of knives against Will’s flesh, slicing away hair and lather before being wiped clean to return again.

Will swallows at the edge of the blade over his larynx, turning his face into the supporting hollow of a tar-black palm when directed so his barber can get at a hard-to-reach spot under his chin. There, against cold black leather skin: the scent of the woods still, dark and wet and full of life and decay, the gnawing, chattering hunger of all living things. The iron of blood

and metal, the resin of gouged trees, the sweet, vanillic taste of gentle rot. It runs down Will's cheeks, tracked with a slow dripping tear from his eye.

A warm, damp cloth wipes Will free of the last of his soap lather, the flannel becoming, for a moment, Will's filter between himself and the world: Hannibal, and the bald, buzzing bathroom light.

There is something almost wondering in Hannibal's expression when Will removes the flannel again - *normal* once more: tan skin, sharp cheekbones, and warm red-brown eyes cataloguing every twitch Will makes in front of him. Fingertips declawed as they stroke down over the point of Will's cheekbone, pressing into the curve of the cheek until Will's flesh dimples under the gentle pressure.

Will squints at him. The world is still a little blurry, moist air making mirages to trick the eye. "...Are you really *poking* me right now?"

Hannibal's mouth parts in a crooked grin, and answers by tapping Will once on the nose instead. *Ugh.* "I see now what you meant before. I may have shaved a decade off your face rather than just some hair."

"I *told* you," Will complains, dumping the flannel in the sink beside them. Debates putting an elbow in Hannibal's ribs for poking him, but ultimately gets distracted by one of Hannibal's hands stroking smoothly over his hip instead. "Eternal baby face syndrome."

Hannibal *hm*s, leaning down to bump their foreheads together. "Would that mean I'm robbing the cradle?"

Will squints at him. Again. A task made much more difficult the second time around because the forehead bump has turned into a slow full face nuzzle, Hannibal rubbing their cheeks and noses and mouths together in something that isn't *quite* scent-marking or *quite* kissing but is. Very close. And Hannibal's five o' clock shadow is doing a delightfully raspy thing on Will's now very clean-shaven, startlingly *sensitive*, exposed skin and Will is- Will is-

Will is prickling *all over* with a confused, amused, happy, bewildered, *exasperated*, low-level arousal, Hannibal's hands big and warm and now up underneath his sweater. Will's mouth is smeared under Hannibal's chin, the flat of his teeth play-scratching over Hannibal's trachea. "...You like this."

"I like all of you," Hannibal says simply, the reverberations of the words buzz-tickling against Will's lips as Will gives a disbelieving snort. Flushed with blood, drunk on the scent of both of them. Held up by the iron strength of Hannibal's arms. "I do. Heaven help the unprepared, Will Graham, when you finally understand the power you hold."

It sounds trite. The expression on Hannibal's face after he says it is anything but, an undeniable magnetism to his eyes that dries up the rebuttal on Will's tongue.

Will licks his parched lips and only feels thirstier afterwards when the focus of Hannibal's gaze drops to Will's mouth. "...I thought we didn't put much stock in heavenly authority?"

“We don’t,” says Hannibal, rubbing their cheeks together again. Ultra fine stubble against smooth skin - Will *wants,* nuzzling back into it thoughtlessly, marking Hannibal with the scent of soap and whatever oils from his natural scent are seeping through his skin. *Want me. Have me.* Pressing up into the heat of Hannibal’s chest against his, strong arms secure around his back. “I want to watch you decimate them.”

Another pulse of heat floods through Will from throat to gut and he laughs. Hannibal doesn’t, but his smile is a proud, savage thing when Will finally manages to seize his mouth in a kiss.

The first victim of the tithe.

Chapter End Notes

Teurgoule: (from French *tordre* + Old/Norman French *goule*, ‘twist-mouth’) a Norman rice pudding made with milk, rice, sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Traditionally baked in a terracotta terrine for hours, the teurgoule forms a thick, crisp crust of caramelised sugar. The name comes from the French *se tordre la gueule*, ‘to twist one’s mouth’, due to the reaction of some people to the spices. *Le Confrérie des gastronomes de Teurgoule et de Fallue de Normandie*, ‘the Brotherhood of Gastronomes of Teurgoule and of Fallue of Normandy’, based in Houlgate, keeps the official recipe for teurgoule and organises the annual teurgoule cooking contest in the commune.

It wasn’t my intention, originally, to drop more Hannibal/Sutcliffe stuff on you all *immediately* after the last chapter, so, for those of you who are a bit woebegotten about that development, my sincerest apologies. I had to restructure a few things about this chapter and a few upcoming ones for plot/timeline reasons, thus bringing forward Hannibal’s exploits with his lame, tragically led-on, duck.

Hachis parmentier (essentially - French shepherd’s pie)
Crespelle with sausage and swiss chard

Stars, hide your fires; /Let not light see my black and deep desires - William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene IV
Rage, rage, against the dying of the light. - Dylan Thomas, an excerpt from *Do not go gentle into that good night*
Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children - William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*
HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE. - Terry Pratchett, *Hogfather* (spoken by Death)

In terms of writing, this was an absolute hell-chapter to get out. Apologies for the delay: life happened (again, as it does). In terms of minor distraction, a good four days of writing time was lost to me losing repeatedly to a computer playing scrabble in US English. For research purposes initially, and then as an attempt to win back some of my

dignity. I won one game. With *soupy*. (I'm not bitter.)

In terms of more major distractions, I caught COVID. Even double-vaxxed, it completely sideswiped me for most of December. I am, thankfully, almost back to my usual state of health now.

I hope you've all had happy holidays, and that they continue to be happy and/or that things improve for you in the new year to come. Stay safe, one and all, where you can: get your vaccinations ASAP, stay masked, and socialise responsibly.

Goodbye for now, good luck to you all, and good riddance 2021! Roll on 2022!

farcement

Chapter Summary

Like mother, like child.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Not too fun being stuck in a hospital over the holidays," says Abigail.

Will hums noncommittally, sitting cross-legged on his hospital bed and half-heartedly answering an email on his phone. "Speaking for yourself there or for me?"

Over on the sofa, Abigail gives a listless sort of shrug. Fiddling with the little dog plushie that Beverly had given Will, folding its soft floppy ears this way and that. "If the shoe fits, or something."

Abigail is in a strange mood today, too nervy to accept being looked at directly for too long, her boots kicked off and knees brought up loosely against her chest. Her toes spread on the sofa cushions in stripy rainbow socks, adolescent whimsy clashing with her more adult-sized jeans and fuzzy, fawn-coloured sweater.

No scarf today, the livid slash of her scar glimpsable every now and then through the fall of her hair.

She looks over at Will, pointedly, for a moment, knowing that he's still watching her out of the corners of his eyes. Bitterness twisting up her mouth. "*You* can sign yourself out of here if you want to."

"Sounds like a bad idea," Will muses as nonchalantly as he can manage, trying and failing to win a battle against his phone's predictive text at the same time. (His *genital mutilation*s keep getting turned into *general multinational*s, which sounds like a discussion well outside of his field of skill. And interest.)

A little aggrieved *chirp* from the sofa.

"Sometimes we have to stay in hospitals for our own good, Abigail." Will sighs, giving up on his email as a lost cause for now and looking back at his guest. The pale discontented moon of her face. "You're right though. Having the choice does matter."

"Good to hear someone acknowledge that for a change," Abigail grouses, half to herself, as she squishes up the plushie's ears some more. Folding and refolding them, over and over again. "I'm getting a bit tired of people telling me I just need to focus less on life outside the

hospital and more on finding *a calm place within.* With a dash of bull-therapeutic-*shit* about the internal steps required as part of my *personal healing journey.*"

"Boldly going forward."

"'Cause we can't find reverse." Abigail fumbles and the dog slips out of her hands, tumbling down onto the sofa by her feet. She sighs, gustily - an exhalation that sounds far too heavy for one so young, circumstances weighing down on her when there is less air to add buoyancy in her chest.

Will presses his lips together, an empathetic anchor dragging down his insides in the cage of their bones. *Breathe, sweetheart.*

Abigail breathes in again, and resettles herself. Picking up the dog plushie again, the forward swing of her straight dark hair temporarily hiding her throat and expression from Will's sight. "What will you do? When you finally get out of here?" Curious.

Will considers the question for a moment or two, aware all the while of the steady rise and fall of his own chest. "...Bury myself in my own bed for a week and refuse to come out except for snacks and toilet breaks."

Abigail laughs, a quick short bark of sound that seems to surprise herself. Barely hiding her grin behind dog plushie and fingers. "Is that it?"

"As if that isn't enough," Will points out, smiling crookedly when Abigail adds her agreement with an indulgent, very teenage, *mmhmm.* Nothing beats a good long sleep in a comfortable bed that smells like safety, yourself and the things that you love. "I'll go fishing, if the weather cooperates. There's a stream near where I live where I like to go when I have the time."

"Yeah?"

"It's peaceful there," says Will, "pretty much undisturbed by humans. Clear waters, soft sloping banks lined by dappled woods. If I'm quiet enough when I'm out in the water, sometimes the local wildlife forgets I'm there and creeps out into the open. Birds, mostly. Squirrels. Deer. An otter or two."

"It sounds lovely," Abigail says wistfully. Her longing for solitude from the public and well-meaning medical professionals no doubt tangled up with remembrance of her own quiet spaces back in the Minnesotan woods. Places that must be tainted for her now.

"A little slice of heaven," Will confirms before promising: "I'll take you there when I can."

Abigail tilts her head, obviously bewildered by the offer.

"Your father taught you how to hunt," says Will. "If- uh, if you'd like, I'll teach you how to fish." Give Abigail some new memories in new quiet places, where the sunlight filtering through the leaves isn't shaded with human blood.

"Same thing, isn't it? One you lure, the other you stalk?"

“One you catch, the other you shoot.” Abigail goes quiet, her thumbs rubbing pensively over the dog plushie’s soft nose. More distant from Will than half a room away, even as he verbally reaches out to her. “Or there’s foraging.”

A polite knock sounds on the ward door - pulled to, rather than closed. Pushed open, the muffled lyrics of Wham!’s *Last Christmas* coming from the nurses’ station suddenly get a lot louder and Alana Bloom, entering apologetically, does her very best not to wince at the warbling *but if you kissed me now, I know you’d fool me again.*

Christ.

“Will?”

“Alana,” Will acknowledges softly - if only so the woman will come inside, shut the door and drown out that God-awful music again, “hey.”

Last Christmas, I-

Alana closes the door with a firm *snick.* The flush on her cheeks as she turns around again is not entirely because of the seasonal windchill, still wrapped up warmly in her scarf and grey wool coat.

She glances around the ward, her automatic smile of greeting spoilt somewhat by the confused furrow in her brow. “...Were you on the phone? I thought I heard you talking to someone.”

“No, I-” Will turns to gesture at Abigail on the sofa, only to discover that Abigail isn’t there.

Abigail’s boots aren’t on the floor. The dog plushie is sitting on Will’s bedside cabinet, where it has been sitting since Beverly gave it to Will.

…Had- Had Abigail ever been there? Will could have lost time again and missed her leaving… but wouldn’t Alana have been with her, to visit? Someone would have brought Abigail to the hospital, and Will can’t- he just can’t-

His heart thundering in his eardrums, Will lifts his phone from where it had been laying limply in his lap and quickly snaps a photograph of Alana by the door. Her flush, slightly frazzled hair and confused expression: all there, rendered as perfectly in digital format as Will can - actually - see it in real life.

(She’s real.)

“Sorry,” Will says in reply to Alana’s half-worried, half-quizzical expression, lowering his phone again. Grimacing a smile as he unfolds his legs, hoping that her beta nose is too weak to pick up the scent of his panicked sweat. “Dropped this thing in the sink earlier and I’m still checking to see if everything works.”

Some of Alana’s concern ebbs away - but not all of it. Still hovering by the door. “Could try leaving it in a bowl of dry rice overnight,” she offers with a hesitant smile.

“Hopefully won’t come to that.” The phone goes back on the bed beside Will’s thigh.

Alana still doesn’t move any closer. Is she afraid Will might make a lunge for her?

Will sighs, and tries not to hunch up in a defensive response. Can’t Will be awkward enough for both of them without Alana joining in? “Don’t you have classes?”

Will’s classes, at that. It’s just after lunchtime on a Thursday, and Alana should be at Quantico to fill in for Will’s lecture at 2pm.

“Shifted around my schedule to have the afternoon free for other work,” Alana explains, and Will can’t begrudge her that. Not really. Even though it’ll probably be a bitch to shift the schedule back again with all his students whenever it is he *finally* gets back to work.

Alana’s hovering, on the other hand, is giving Will a tension headache.

“Please,” he says, rubbing at his eyes with the back of one hand as though that will do anything for the thudding in his skull, “come on in.” Alana hesitates half a beat more, so he adds: “I promise I won’t try to kiss you again.”

Alana *comes on in.* Each of her steps quiet and precise, her bag left on the arm of the sofa she passes to reach Will sitting on the bed. Her hands clasped in front of her now - a nervous, closed-off pose. Still wearing her awkward smile.

She smells like violets, anise and cold fresh air. She has faint shadows under her eyes. (Selfishly, Will hopes that she’s lost a little sleep because of him. Yearning in the night.)

“Unless-” Will swallows, feeling the *click* of it in his dry throat. Voice rougher when he tries again. “Unless you stopped taking your own advice.”

Something tight softens around Alana’s eyes: she’s grateful he addressed the elephant in the room. One pressure valve released. But her smile is still conciliatory rather than encouraging. “A doctor who treats herself has a fool for a patient.”

The issue of objectivity. Will nods guardedly.

Alana continues more softly, “I regretted leaving here like I did the other day.”

Will lifts his head, a *throb* behind his sternum echoing the one in his head. “Regretted?” An interesting choice of words. An interesting choice of tense. “Implying that you are no longer regretting? Or are you still in a state of regret?”

Will watches Alana internally ask herself that before she answers - them both - honestly: “I’m criss-crossing the state line.”

That- Will doesn’t know what to *do* with that. “What side of the line are you on now?”

Alana’s smile is still a gentle one as she comes closer again. Sympathetic. She knows what she’s doing to him. “I’ve got one foot planted firmly on both sides.”

A sweet, painful knife twists in Will's chest, and he cannot help but flinch as it turns, blinking rapidly to try and dispel the hurt. "You telling me that to confuse me?" His voice cracks.

"No," Alana says, so soft Will can barely hear her, "I'm telling you to be honest about how I feel. I don't want to mislead you but I don't want to lie either."

Will nods. Looking down at his hands, still folded in his lap, his thumbs barely stroking across the almost-invisible swell of his abdomen below his clothes. Centring himself around that with a few deep breaths before glancing up at Alana again from beneath his eyelashes with a gentle challenge: "I won't lie if you won't."

No more dancing away from difficult truths. For either of them.

Alana's smile gains a wince around its edges, accepting the light - shared - reprimand. She lifts a hand, her fingers curving lightly around Will's clean-shaven jaw. Violet and anise perfume sweet against her pulse, under the cuff of her coat sleeve. "This is new."

"My usual was getting too difficult to maintain by myself with my hand-eye coordination currently fucked up. Easier just to shave it all off for now."

"It suits you," says Alana, and Will lets his eyes drift closed for a moment as her thumb caresses his cheek. *Imagine.* "Not that your usual look doesn't suit you, but this looks good on you as well."

"Keep talking like that, *cher,*" Will drawls a little weakly, resisting with every fibre of his being the impulse to reach out and tug on the belt of Alana's coat, drawing the beta nearer still, "and people might assume you want something from me."

Alana's hand lifts Will's jaw - barely, just enough - and the look in her eyes, when Will can bring himself to meet them, is so tender it *aches.* "I have feelings for you, Will."

She does. She really does. *Hope is the thing with feathers,* and it flutters in Will's lungs, giving flight to the heart in his chest.

"But I can't just have an affair with you," Alana says. "It would be-" she pauses, breaking their eyelock, and sighs - "reckless." Swallowing with the disappointment she has caused herself.

"Why?" Will asks her, wistful. And then has to laugh with not a little amount of self-mockery, because he can *hear* himself and just how pathetic he sounds, trailing after this beta woman who wants him and doesn't want him and keeps handing him rejection after rejection despite her own obvious interest.

(*"She would feel an obligation to her field of study to observe you,"* Hannibal had said, and the memory of his words now makes the back of Will's teeth itch with the urge to snarl away the bitterness. *"And you would resent her for it."*)

"*Why*?" Will pries again, because if the line between them has to be cut… Will would at least like to know *why.* Given the peace of closure, granted the truth of why they could not both go

together beyond Bluebeard's one forbidden door. "And it is *not* because you have a professional curiosity about me."

"No," says Alana, "it's because I think you're unstable." And all of Will's breath shudders out of him, because that one - *again* - has hit him where it hurts. "And until that changes I can only be your friend."

The silence is deafening, and Will -

Will, when he finishes reeling even though he's already sitting down, can only manage a neutral, "...Thank you for not lying." He'd asked for the truth, after all.

Somewhat awkwardly, Alana drops her hand from his face. Rubbing at her opposite elbow with it, trying to distract herself from the discomfort she's feeling now - that they're *both* feeling now. "Encephalitis progresses gradually but can plateau for long periods of time. It's why it can be so hard to diagnose, especially the autoimmune variety. There might be no tumours. No lesions. Doesn't show up on a brain scan unless you know you're looking for it."

"Believe me," says Will. "I know."

"Do they have any idea how long you've been sick? Do *you*?" Alana bites her lower lip with her teeth nervously, trying to articulate herself and in the process chewing away the soft rosebud tint of her lipstick. "We kissed, but I don't- I don't want you to blink back to lucidity a week or month from now and regret the decisions you made whilst cognitively impaired."

…Is it that difficult for her to accept that Will, now fully aware of the state of his own health, might actually know his own mind? That if he dives into things at times it's because he has been ruminating over those same things, however consciously or subconsciously, for a great deal longer, and one final trigger has simply given him the impetus to at last take the plunge?

Even with encephalitis temporarily fucking up his brain, Will is still the same man he's always been. The core of him is true, *surely,* even with fever sloughing off some of the social niceties.

Even with all of Alana's questioning making him question himself and all his life choices.

(Even hallucinating an entire conversation with Abigail Hobbs?)

"I'd like to get to know you, Will," says Alana, because it seems she's convinced herself she can't trust anything Will has shown her already. "Really know you. And know that it's you, really you, knowing me. But I think that… That's probably not going to be for a long time."

"No," Will agrees quietly. His throat hurts: an ache difficult to swallow around. His heart hurts as well and that's worse.

Alana and he both, in all likelihood, need to be different people. And maybe they will both *be* those different people someday, but right now at least one of them thinks too much. And Will isn't so sure he likes the way Alana thinks about *him* any more.

Alana hesitates. “...Do you feel unstable?”

Will stares at her for a moment - and then, unable to speak around the hurt in his throat, in his chest, gives her a slow nod. An *mhmm* that has turned thready at the edges, already a soft, painful and embarrassingly omega, whine.

Without saying anything more, Alana sits down on the bed beside him and folds Will into her arms. Hooking her chin over Will’s shoulder and hugging him with a tight, grounding hold, offering all-over pressure like a thundershirt for skittish omegas.

It feels so *good* Will wants to cry. It feels like warm hands on cold skin, like a balm applied directly to the ache in his chest, and it thaws the Arctic ice-shelf held at bay behind his eyelashes. Tears prickle, but Will doesn’t want to cry into Alana’s hair, his cheek buried in the soft, flower-scented frazzle of her tresses, his breath still shuddering out of him as Alana rubs and soothingly scent-marks his back. Violets and anise, friendship and concern.

Will closes his eyes and lets himself have this. Snuggling into Alana and holding her back.

(The door on a gentle wish just as gently swings shut.)

“I can’t be what I want to be for you,” Alana says eventually. Quietly. Still stroking Will’s back like she’s afraid to let him go. “But I am here.”

Will doesn’t answer her. Behind his still-closed eyes, the world is the fuzzy twilight that tenderly blankets the moments between half-sleep and true consciousness. The sandman’s last and kindest protection against the blunter facts of day.

Alana keeps holding him anyway, and doesn’t pull away until what feels like aeons later, when Will pulls away from her first - startled from his drifting by the harsh buzz of something in Alana’s coat pocket. Her phone.

“It’s Port Haven,” Alana says, frowning down at the phone screen before excusing herself to Will’s bathroom to take the call.

Will takes the moment alone to scrub the itch out of his eyes and grab a few mouthfuls of bottled water, glancing at Alana inquiringly when she returns to the main room of his suite - looking much more harried than when she’d left.

“It’s Abigail Hobbs,” she says (as though there’s *another* Abigail out there that they both know and that Will gives a damn about). “She’s attacked Freddie Lounds with a chair.”

Even with Will’s dogs safely kennelled, Hannibal still finds himself making the drive out to Wolf Trap around twice a week - either in the dark early morning hours before he has seen

any of his patients for the day, or around midday when he has a long scheduled lunch. Will regularly requires fresh clothing - as his worn clothes are either incorporated into his nest or whisked away entirely by the hospital laundry service - and fresh literature to occupy himself with during the dull hours in his ward.

As Hannibal had once noted to Will himself, Will is a voracious and erudite reader. Even with the distraction of hospital tests and consultations, Will can plough his way through three-to-four average-length novels in a day if he puts his mind to it (or simply, as Hannibal suspects Will might, neglects to consistently get his recommended amount of sleep), and remains humbly and gratifyingly grateful when Hannibal provides him with fresh clothes and reading material from Wolf Trap. A few books slipped in with the rest from Hannibal's own personal and office libraries are there for Hannibal to gauge the limits of Will's interests, fiction and non-fiction alike, and where they might overlap or diverge from Hannibal's own.

Will has yet to wholly discard anything Hannibal has brought him to read from either of their collections - though whether that is because Will is actively engaging with the new literature or because reading *anything* is better than watching the dreck available to him on the hospital television is another debate entirely.

Part I of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* keeps Hannibal company that lunchtime as he makes the drive from Baltimore down to Virginia, a break for the classical music radio station from their seasonal persistent overdosing on *The Nutcracker Suite*. *Jauchzet, frohlocket! Auf, preiset die Tage!* The call to exuberance is a fitting accompaniment to Hannibal's own high spirits: the results of Will's bloodwork had come through earlier that morning, and Hannibal now holds the legal proof that he is, indeed, the biological father of the child growing in Will's womb.

The results have already been forwarded on to Hannibal's solicitors so that they can get a jump-start on resolving the tangle of international red tape that will arise upon the birth of a Lecter heir. Hannibal's child will be protected by all their father's wealth and great estate endows from their very first breath, and, upon Hannibal's death, his legal team will see to it that his child receives all that they are entitled to.

The walk from Hannibal's Bentley to Will's front porch leaves a trail of footprints through a thin layer of otherwise pristine snow. A little more work - and a hammer borrowed from where Will had left it lying in the middle of his living room floor beside a partially disassembled motor and the rest of his toolbox - sees a Christmas wreath nailed on the front door.

Both the footprints and the decoration serve to make Will's home look less abandoned, and should hopefully deter any burglars desperate enough to make the trek out to Will's secluded little farmhouse. The wreath should, perhaps, give Will a moment's holiday cheer if he ever sees it; Hannibal had constructed it himself with some of the greenery that he had had delivered to his home the day before.

Avoiding the toxic berries of holly and mistletoe - which could fall from the wreath as they dry and be consumed by Will's dogs -, Hannibal had opted for branches of more animal-friendly fir, creating a charmingly rustic wreath wrapped in blue and silver ribbons. A few delicate blooms of white gypsophila subtly woven in: a small declaration to the universe and

the eagle-eyed. All perfectly in keeping with the aesthetic of Will's Wolf Trap farmhouse, his little boat on the sea.

Inside, Hannibal takes fresh clothing from Will's regimented drawers of white t-shirts, underwear and socks to pack into the bag he has brought with him. Adjusting the scented packets he himself had laid amongst Will's underthings to deter moths. The borrowed hammer goes back into Will's toolbox, and the new, low angle Hannibal has of Will's living room as he crouches down to put both the hammer and a few of the other tools he has found scattered about the - likely boat - motor on the floor gives him a glimpse of *something* on one of Will's lower cluttered bookshelves. A not-a-book something, nor a little dog figurine.

As many do, Will keeps his heaviest books closest to the floor. Hardbacks and thick tomes: the volumes no-one likes to have dropped on them from above. The item that has piqued Hannibal's curiosity sits behind/between Arden's *Complete Works* of Shakespeare and *The Oresteia,* and Hannibal scratches his knuckles on the hardbacks' sharper corners when he reaches back into the shelf to retrieve it.

His prize is an obviously old, slim, dark blue and hinged velvet box: the kind in which stiff elaborate necklaces or omega collars are kept, as it is too small for a parure. It is no surprise to Hannibal, therefore, to open the box and discover an omega collar inside, the necklace resting on a cushion made of the same worn - but slightly cleaner - velvet as the box.

As omega collars go, the piece Hannibal now holds is a rather simple thing, made primarily of woven silks in traditional omega blue and with a pendant locket positioned to tantalisingly hang just *so* in the hollow of its wearer's throat. The clasp is made of silver so tarnished by time Hannibal has to turn the metal towards the light to be able to make out the name, *Boisclair,* and three six-pointed stars inscribed upon it, the middle star raised above the two flanking it, a circle in each of their hearts.

The heraldic symbols are repeated on the surface of the equally tarnished silver locket, and inside the locket…

Two photographs. One, a smiling, beautiful woman with long, dark, messy curls tumbling around her near-bare shoulders, wearing the same omega collar that the locket is hanging upon (though in a better, more cared-for state). Her resemblance to Will is both striking and undeniable even with time fading the photograph's hues: that hair, that fine bone structure, the pale cream of the woman's complexion. She has the same sharp pixie-like delicacy to her pink mouth that Will has. The same little uptick at the end of her nose that threatens mischief or a smile or a little indignant *scrunch*.

With the blatant resemblance and the age of the photograph, all probability suggests that the first photograph is a picture of Will's mother.

The second photograph is a picture of a baby that can only be Will. Taken when Will had to have been at least half a year old, baby Will already has his mother's raucous dark hair, his big blue eyes and beautiful mouth. Cheeks round with baby fat that dimple when he smiles, and those sweet sticky-out ears that he probably took until adulthood to grow into.

Hannibal strokes fondly over the photographed curve of those sticky-out ears with the tip of his thumb, an echo of the motion he is more accustomed to performing upon Will's more adult self.

If Hannibal had ever had any doubts that his and Will's baby will be blessed with superb genetics physiognomically as well as intellectually, those doubts have now certainly been put to rest. The perfect alchemical result: pure gold.

The omega collar goes back into its box, and Hannibal slips the box into his bag.

On the shelf above its previous home: an instruction manual on fly fishing whose tenderly cracked spine catches Hannibal's eye. He pulls the book out before standing upright again, flipping through its pages with idle interest.

The table by the window is still bristling with Will's handmade fishing flies and the tools to create them, midday sunlight glinting on the bright metal hooks yet to be hidden beneath clever lures. Hannibal is drawn to their dangerous beauty, taking a seat at the fly-tying station and admiring Will's rack of finished lures, the half-finished fly - a classic Atlantic salmon fly, according to the instruction manual - still waiting in Will's vice.

Hannibal consults the manual still in his grasp for a little while longer before setting the book aside, picking up the tools on the table - bobbin, thread, pliers and scissors - to finish Will's lure under the lens of a magnifying glass. A precise surgery on hook, bright feathers and wild rabbit fur rather than flesh.

Will must forage for many of the elements of his lures in the woods and wild outside his home, picking up pieces here and there on his walks with his pack. Using nature to conquer nature and creating an illusion of vulnerability, whilst lurking below the lovely exterior -

A bright pinpoint of delicious pain, a dot of scarlet blooming on Hannibal's thumb where he had pressed it to the barb of his finished salmon fly. Blooding the hook.

Thumb to his lips, Hannibal sucks the lone droplet of blood away. The taste of it is the soft wet metal of so many of Will's kisses, the swollen, violent flush of Will's kiss-ravaged mouth.

His cell phone rings.

With fresh clothes and reading materials gathered for Will, Hannibal should be returning to Baltimore soon for lunch and a short rest before seeing the first of his patients that afternoon. After ending his phonecall with a stressed Alana Bloom and making the drive to Baltimore, however, Hannibal finds himself diverted to the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility and the brewing storm cloud there.

It would seem that Freddie Lounds had snuck her way into the facility again in the hopes of cajoling an interview - or at the very least, a quote - from Abigail Hobbs for one of her many articles. And, of course, things had gone somewhat badly for everyone.

According to Abigail's version of events, Abigail had been alone in the recreation room when Lounds had come up behind her and grabbed her arm. Abigail, reacting in fright even before she'd seen her attacker and only smelling *alpha stranger,* had grabbed the wooden chair immediately to her right and swung around with it, smashing the chair into Lounds' side and forcing the other woman away.

(Like mother figure, like child: the thought of Will armed with a shovel and equally, righteously, defensively *furious* in the face of Eldon Stammets' provocation springs to mind. A spade for Will, a chair for Abigail. Omegas that defend themselves fiercely by attacking first.

Freddie Lounds should be more grateful that Abigail is so slight and so unused to swinging heavy objects by herself. And that Abigail hadn't been holding a knife instead.)

The badly bruised Lounds - before she had been forcibly escorted off of the premises - had insisted, first, that Abigail had attacked her unprovoked, and then, after being shown security footage of the recreation room by an angry Dr. Bloom, that Abigail could hardly claim *self-defence* when her actions were an immediate escalation of the situation and wholly disproportionate to Lounds' 'gentle tap' on her shoulder.

Alana has threatened to charge Lounds with breaking and entering. Lounds has snidely implied that she may sue Abigail Hobbs for grievous bodily harm, and Port Haven for their failure to control their own patients. It is almost certain that *Tattlecrime* is very shortly going to have some choice words to say about Abigail - and Abigail is devastated. And defiant.

And has locked herself in the nesting cavity built into the eaves of her private ward and is refusing to come out or further talk about what had happened to her unless Hannibal, Will or both of them come to see her at Port Haven.

Abigail's ward smells strongly of sharp elemi, warmed sea-salt and bitter stress, even with the young woman herself still refusing to leave her nest - and the wooden door to the nesting cavity she has ensconced herself within firmly slammed shut. The bitter green notes of *Alana's* stress sit fresh atop it all, the beta doctor frustratedly rattling at the nest's sliding door as Hannibal enters the room. Pleading Abigail's name fruitlessly to the unyielding wood.

Hannibal is mildly impressed. Small nesting cavities in medical facilities do not have doors that lock, so as to allow emergency access to patients at all times. With no access to a usual toolbox, Abigail must have jerry-rigged some kind of locking mechanism out of nothing but fabrics and child-safe craft supplies - and done a rather stellar job of it judging by the somewhat exhausted slump to Alana's shoulders and the peeved expressions of the orderlies waiting in the hallway outside of the room.

Sent away, after failing to open the door themselves, to avoid overcrowding Abigail.

Alana has kicked off her almost smooth-soled heels for a better grip on the floor, but the nest's sliding door refuses to budge despite all the tugging Alana does on its handle or all the weary pounding its panels take with the side of her fist. Alana's knuckles, it seems, are already sore from all the knocking she must have done, and her cheeks are flushed high with pink from exertion.

To get inside the nest without Abigail's consent will likely involve either smashing a hole in the door or popping the door off its tracks entirely, and neither action is advisable. Abigail could be physically injured, and the mental and emotional trauma of having her nest forcibly invaded could set back her therapy significantly. Devastating her faith in the people responsible. Alana pounding on the nest's door is an assault in itself, and the action would be strongly discouraged under normal circumstances, but, with Abigail's physical and mental wellbeing uncertain after the day's events, and the air so perfumed with tears and fear and outrage…

"*Hannibal*."

Alana's pathetic relief at seeing Hannibal enter the room is so blatant it would be almost amusing if Hannibal had the amusement to spare, her shoulders going limp as she steps away from the cavity's door and towards him. Grateful, and perhaps the most discomposed that Hannibal has ever seen her.

Navy blue and cream wrap dress slightly askew, hair dishevelled from stressed fingers combing back through it… one could almost call Alana Bloom *frazzled.*

Hannibal dips his head to her in polite greeting, opening the buttons to his coat and loosening his scarf. "Apologies for my tardiness. I was out of the city when you called."

"I'm just glad you could make it. Abigail -" Alana bites her lip, recalling their silent - and no doubt listening - third companion. Raising her voice slightly: "Abigail, Dr. Lecter is here as you requested. Will you come out now please?"

The nesting cavity is silent.

Hannibal sighs inwardly, removing his gloves before crossing the room and crouching down in front of the cavity's door. "Abigail, open the door."

A ham sandwich on a plate, a bottle each of water and coca-cola, one apple and a small pile of kit-kats sit outside the nest. Food, offered as a bribe to try and get Abigail to come out: obviously rejected.

A slight shuffling from inside the nest.

"Abigail," Hannibal says sternly. For all his growing fondness for Abigail and his wish to oversee her development, there is only one omega that Hannibal will accept unnecessary prevarication from - and Abigail Hobbs is not him. "I understand that you wish to be left alone, but Dr. Bloom has a duty of care to make sure that you are uninjured."

A few more moments of shuffling - likely the disassembly of whatever Abigail has been using to lock or jam the door -, and then Abigail finally slides open the much-abused door to her nest.

A few things become clear at once. Firstly, that Abigail had been crying at some point, and, as Hannibal can smell no blood on her, that the tears are likely a result of mental and emotional upset rather than serious physical injury.

Secondly, judging by the very shrewd glint Hannibal catches in her red-rimmed eyes, Abigail Hobbs is not as emotionally compromised as she wants Alana to think she is.

“You came,” says Abigail. Still very pale and waiflike in jeans and a dusty rose-coloured sweater, kneeling in a small, dim nest made up of clothes, hospital linens and her dead mother’s blanket. The scent of distress is heavy around her, and her gauzy purple scarf has been knotted in a bow around her neck: making a pet of herself, clever thing.

“I did,” Hannibal says evenly, and offers Abigail a courteous hand to clamber up out of the nesting cavity, bringing the girl up to her feet with himself.

Where she immediately turns and clings to his chest, sliding in between the open wings of his coat. “I don’t want to stay here any more.”

Hannibal has, of late, been growing accustomed to having an armful of clinging omega and tears leaving damp spots on his clothes. The differences here, however, are still notable: Abigail is both slighter and shorter than Will, and her brown hair long and smooth under Hannibal’s palm as he strokes gently over her back, between her shoulder blades.

A foot away, Alana’s expression is pinched tight with guilt and concern as she gestures for the orderlies to leave. “Abigail…”

Abigail turns her face from Hannibal’s chest just enough to stare accusingly at her therapist. “You said I was safe here. You *promised.”* Her scent still piquant with elemi and other resins: recrimination.

“You are,” Alana says immediately, reassuringly.

Hannibal *hm*s. “This is the second time Ms. Lounds has managed to get inside the property she is supposedly barred from.”

Alana gives him a frustrated look for that, apparently unappreciative of the reminder in front of Abigail. As though Abigail is unaware that the ‘safe space’ made for her at Port Haven has already been repeatedly compromised.

Hannibal ignores Alana and looks down at the young woman still clutching at the lapels of his suit jacket. “What did she want?”

“I don’t know.” Abigail shakes her head, freeing one hand from Hannibal’s clothes to scrub at the dried tear-tracks on her cheeks. “She didn’t say anything before she grabbed my arm, and then she was yelling.”

“Because you hit her with a chair.” Alana.

Abigail stiffens in wounded outrage. “She *grabbed me.* I didn’t know who it was- I almost fell over backwards, she jerked me so hard!”

“I know,” Alana says soothingly, daring to come a few steps closer at last, still without her shoes, “but Freddie is claiming otherwise.” Looking at Hannibal - “She broke a plant pot when she fell.”

Abigail frowns fiercely, resentful gold flashing through the blue of her eyes. “She called me a monster. Just like my dad.” More disconsolately as some of the fight drains out of her, “She’ll write that and everyone will believe her.”

“I won’t,” Hannibal tells her, smiling encouragingly when Abigail lifts her head again to look at him with the faint stirrings of hope. “Nor will Dr. Bloom, or Will.” Alana nods in wordless agreement when Abigail glances over at her, seeking confirmation, and Hannibal continues, “Are you injured anywhere?”

“My shoulder’s a bit-” Abigail reaches up, self-consciously, to touch her left shoulder, her fingers spread to span from her collarbone to the socket joint. “I think I jerked my arm.”

Hannibal waits for Abigail’s permissive nod before he investigates, pushing aside the trailing ends of her scarf and the collar of her sweater to expose the skin beneath.

There is no damage to the bones that Hannibal can see or feel and Abigail can articulate her shoulder with very little complaint. Abigail has, however, been scratched by someone’s nails, pink welts raised on pale skin - with the reddish discolouration of a young bruise blossoming in the flesh alongside.

There had been some force in Freddie Lounds’ grip. Whether it had been when the alpha had first grabbed Abigail or as a result of Abigail twisting in the other woman’s grip is unknown, but the marks are proof that Lounds had laid her hands on something that wasn’t hers to touch.

Hannibal’s lips thin, ire solidifying into something cold and hard in his spleen. “Take a photograph of this,” he instructs Alana shortly. Assuring the somewhat nervous-looking Abigail as Alana fetches her phone, “Some mild bruising. Nothing a little rest and some ibuprofen won’t fix.”

Abigail tugs at the neckline of her sweater so Alana can get a better picture of her bruise, flicking back her hair anxiously as Alana moves around her. “Is it even worth pressing charges?”

“Ms. Lounds was trespassing,” says Hannibal. A little perplexed by the fact he can smell *Will* all of a sudden, a faint whiff of antiseptic wipes, sweet spice and pines that - for very obvious reasons - *cannot* be coming from Abigail. “Between that, her assault on you, and previous articles she has published about you, I’m sure my lawyers could make a good case for harassment. Or at the very least spook her into leaving you alone for some time.”

Voice still small but her tone rising hopefully, Abigail begs, “Would you?”

“I’ll be in touch with them as soon as we’re finished here,” Hannibal promises her - before seeking out Alana’s eyes with his own. His smile cooling considerably with implicit warning for the other beta. “Meanwhile, I’m certain Port Haven will be conducting a review of their site security.”

To her credit, Alana accepts her portion of blame without flinching. She lowers her phone, evidence gathered. “Of course. This won’t happen again, Abigail; I promise.”

“You promised *last* time,” says Abigail with near-savage dismissiveness. Apparently wanting more out of her day’s performance than simply having Freddie Lounds dealt with for her. She turns plaintively to Hannibal again, eyes as wide and young as the clear blue skies of morning. “I don’t want to stay here any more. Can I go home with you?”

No wonder she had demanded Will’s presence that lunchtime as well. Will would have taken one look at those big begging eyes and crumbled instantly.

“Abigail,” Alana tries consolingly, “this will all blow over in a few days. You’ll look back on this, and it will all just look like a storm in a teacup. Things change.”

Abigail looks to Hannibal, obviously expecting his assistance again with a rebuttal - and meets instead the stone wall of Hannibal’s neutrality. Her expression flashes with hurt at his perceived betrayal and she lashes out, taking a step back away from him. “Yes, things change. For instance, *you’re* here. For a change. More than can be said for Will.”

More reproach from Alana. “Abigail.”

“Things are changing for others as well,” Hannibal reminds the petulant child in front of him. People exist and have their own concerns outside of the sphere of Abigail Hobbs, and it is about time that she remembers that. “Will is extremely sick and in hospital at the moment.”

Abigail stares at him, thunderstruck. No-one has told her.

“Autoimmune encephalitis,” Hannibal elaborates. He can still smell Will, the air around Hannibal haunted by the presence of the omega who isn’t there. “The body’s immune system attacks the brain as if it is itself an infection.”

Abigail hesitates, her anger deflating as her conscience pricks at it. “...Is he going to be okay?”

“His doctors believe so, but treatment and recovery will take many weeks.”

“Is- is he awake?” Abigail clarifies: “Not in a coma, I mean.”

Hannibal nods. “He’s awake. The nature of encephalitis, however, means that he is not always lucid and aware.”

Resolve hardens the line of Abigail’s jaw. “I want to see him.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea right now,” says Alana carefully, and Abigail frowns again. Shying out from under the gentle hand Alana tries to lay on her shoulder - a touch mildly scented with a hospital a good distance away from this one, smoky cardamom, ozone and pines.

“The visit would have to be supervised,” says Hannibal, his eyes narrowing consideringly at his colleague, “and both Dr. Bloom and I are unfortunately busy.”

Judging by the scent gently emanating from Alana when the woman smoothes back some of her own ruffled hair, Dr. Bloom has already been to see Will today *anyway.*

Now that Hannibal has pinpointed where the scent of Will is coming from he can pick out the elements of it better: the taste-scent of Will's sadness and stress on Alana's fingertips and wrist, buried deeply in the dark strands of her hair.

What *exactly* has Alana Bloom been doing to have been marked by Will's scent in such a way? And why is Will upset?

"So I'm stuck here," Abigail concludes, refusing to be cajoled into a better mood.

Alana, smile-wincing at the girl's dour tones, continues to try anyway. "Perhaps you could think of it as using your time wisely. Leaning upon the resources available to you to prepare yourself for the future."

Abigail makes a rather disgusted chirp, tired of the platitudes, and Alana's smile wears thin.

"It's all a matter of perspective."

"A storm in a teacup can be a dangerous thing if one is trapped inside the teacup," Hannibal reminds his former protégée. Choosing to see the glass as half-full doesn't mean the glass is currently holding any more water than the pessimist's. "But," and before Abigail can seize upon his tacit agreement with her, "Dr. Bloom does make a valid point. One can certainly lose perspective tucked away for weeks in an ivory tower."

Alana's brow creases. That hadn't quite been where she had been taking her point - and Hannibal knows it -, but she is unwilling to correct Hannibal in front of Abigail and erode this apparent show of therapeutic unity. "Perhaps," she says to Abigail, "if you spoke about your feelings in your support group -"

"I want to take self-defence classes," says Abigail. Cutting her short. "You want me to change my perspective, right? Well, I want to learn how to protect myself."

Alana is taken aback and, unfortunately, shows it. "…Abigail, today's incident was a one-off. I know we've let you down, but it's important that you know that you're safe here. We *can* look after you."

"And *I* need to look after myself," Abigail staunchly maintains, folding her arms protectively around herself. "You're always telling me that it's important for me to take back control of my own life, to be proactive about my own healing process. And this is that."

Turning Alana's own advice against her.

"Many women and omegas find self-defence classes empowering," Hannibal adds when Alana turns to him, obviously seeking his support in shutting the idea down. She fails to get it. "They develop a sense of self-sufficiency alongside keeping fit and making new friends, all of which have positive mental benefits."

"Port Haven doesn't offer self-defence classes." Alana is scrabbling for straws.

"I'm sure a local sports centre or community hall must," says Hannibal. "I'd be willing to pay any fees, if you both feel such lessons would be beneficial for Abigail." He smiles at Abigail,

the image of a genial and benevolent guardian. “Add another string to your bow.”

Without Hannibal behind her, Alana has to focus her attempts on Abigail. “Abigail, it’s not that I want to discourage you from embracing new hobbies or getting some exercise, but I’m just not sure self-defence classes would be the best thing for you. It isn’t good for you to be living in the expectation of attack all the time, and I’m worried that self-defence classes might encourage that mindset.”

“I don’t expect to be attacked all the time,” Abigail immediately denies. “I just- I want to be reassured that if someone *did* attack me, I could survive long enough to get help.”

Clever, clever girl.

Switching on those wide, wide eyes again, Abigail drives the nail in: “Feeling so helpless all the time… I don’t think *that’s* good for me either.”

And there is no arguing with *that.*

Grudgingly, Alana folds. “…If I sign off on this - and I really do mean *if* - , I’d feel better if I knew you were taking up a productive hobby or two as well. Physically creating something with your own two hands.” She sighs, a quick drop of her stiffened shoulders. “Life isn’t all about conflict.”

“…My mom sometimes did scrapbooking,” Abigail says. Sounding rather dubious.

“Would that be something you’d be interested in?”

Abigail shakes her head again. “Not really. And my dad-” Her expression clouds over, grey mist descending from the mountains. “I don’t really want to do any crafts that my dad used to do.”

Garret Jacob Hobbs had applied himself to quite a few.

“There are many different kinds of handicrafts,” Hannibal says reassuringly. “Or, if you’d prefer something a little more intangible, you could take up an instrument. Do you play any already?”

“Not really.” Abigail chews on her lower lip. “I think- do you think I could learn how to crochet? There was a boy back in school who used to make his own leg-warmers and beanies, and they always looked cool. And people sometimes crochet those cute little toy things.”

Alana brightens with the proposition of such a wholesome - and traditionally omega - hobby. “That sounds like a wonderful idea.”

“If you could get me the stuff,” Abigail suggests tentatively, sensing the approval now being radiated in her direction, “I could look up a few lessons and patterns online, and then do some of my crocheting during the arts and crafts group here.”

Implying - but not promising outright, Hannibal notes - that Abigail might willingly attend at least *art* group therapy at Port Haven.

Alana smiles, and this time Abigail doesn't shy away from her when she reaches out again. "I'd be happy to."

"And maybe-" Abigail turns her big blue eyes and bitten lip on Hannibal again - and perseveres with it despite the amused lift of his brow.

Hannibal knows she knows that he knows what she's doing, and Abigail knows that Hannibal - probably - isn't going to stop her from trying to do it. From this one incident, Abigail has already argued her way into scheduled time outside of Port Haven and regular access to the internet. Hannibal is interested to see what else she can wrangle out of her keepers before the day is done.

Abigail tosses back her hair again, the loops bouncing on the bow of her scarf, and puts on her show. "You cook, right? You're a good cook."

"I like to believe I am," Hannibal replies - hardly needing to sing his own praises when Alana immediately steps in to do it with a fervent nod.

"He is." So reliable of her.

Abigail knows this already, clasping her hands in front of her as her scent sweetens with the wild, playful note of blackberry. "Could *you* maybe teach me how to cook?"

Alana interjects. "We do have cookery classes here-"

Abigail touches the beta woman's hand, cutting Alana short. "I went to a few. We made chocolate rice krispie cakes and fruit kebabs. I think I can handle something a little bit more advanced than that, Dr. Bloom." Eyes slanted back at Hannibal - "If you've got the time. If you'd be okay with that?"

The idea is an intriguing one. Abigail's biological father had taught her how to hunt, but Hannibal, as her new father, could be the one to teach Abigail how to cook what their new family will kill. Bringing the girl into the heart of her new home and keeping her there until she is accustomed to her new circumstances, building the perfect image of domesticity that Will's heart softly yearns for.

"Perhaps a lesson or two every other weekend," Hannibal allows, "and some things for you to try yourself under supervision here."

"I'd appreciate that a lot," Abigail says with apparent full sincerity. Before looking pleadingly once more at Alana Bloom, all her plans now laid out on the table for approval. "Please?"

Time away from Port Haven in a scheduled class at least once a week, time away from Port Haven in Hannibal's home every other week, access to the internet and the increased likelihood that Alana will leave her alone more often to get on with her new hobbies. Abigail hasn't done too badly for herself for being assaulted by Freddie Lounds.

"…Alright, alright. You win." Alana caves.

Abigail beams at her. “The self-defence lessons too?”

Alana sighs but nods.

“I’ll start looking at what’s available in the local area,” Hannibal assures both women when they look at him, and Abigail’s happy scent of blackberries, woods and hay sweeps out into the air around them all.

Alana finds her shoes to step into again, and the little world of Abigail's ward is slowly put back to rights.

“Thank you for coming,” Alana says to Hannibal a little time later, the two of them meandering slowly down the hallway outside of Abigail’s ward. Leaving the young omega to nibble on the limp ham sandwich of her missed lunch - though not before one last warning to Abigail that if she tries to lock her nest’s door again, Alana, for safety reasons, will have to take away the door entirely and replace it with a curtain.

“It was no trouble at all,” says Hannibal, buttoning up his coat again as they walk. He has missed his own opportunity for a meal for this little meeting, but events have given him much food for thought. “Though I really must be going in order to make my afternoon appointments.”

Alana nods, offering a hopeful, “Walk you to your car?”

Hannibal accepts because it is obvious she wants to prolong their conversation, and the little burst of Will’s scent that fills the air again when Alana pulls her coat on distracts him with new questions.

They crunch their way along Port Haven’s snow-covered paths together towards the visitors’ parking lot, Alana putting her hands in her pockets, ducking her nose down into her collar against the cold.

“I should apologise. I didn’t want to drag you into things, but I was desperate. Abigail really was quite adamant she wouldn’t talk about what happened until either you or Will were here.” Somewhat apologetically - “Didn’t realise it was because she planned to throw herself on your charity.”

How can Hannibal fault Abigail for seizing the opportunity to use a bad event to gain something good for herself? In her shoes, Hannibal would have likely done something similar.

“She was searching for a friendly, sympathetic ear,” Hannibal says soothingly, though it just causes Alana to frown at him.

“Am I suddenly that terrifying to talk to?”

“You are, as ever, eminently approachable,” says Hannibal as his Bentley comes into view - a little piqued still by Will’s scent on her person, by the memory of Will’s murmured *wanted to kiss her since I met her.* (Alana Bloom could, in Hannibal’s opinion, do with being a little *less*

approachable. For her own good.) “But, Alana, the role you play in Abigail’s current, rather limited, network of support is that of a doctor rather than a friend. Professional boundaries will always dictate that there be some distance between you both.”

Alana sighs, one long plume of frustrated breath into the chilly air. “Even as her doctor, there’s only so much I can do if she won’t *talk* to me.”

Hannibal hums. “I believe Abigail was quite articulate back there about her current needs and desires.”

“Practical ones, for the most part,” says Alana. “I’m concerned that she may be repressing herself emotionally. Trying to keep herself busy so she doesn’t have to stop and *feel* things.”

“Her new hobbies may encourage her to take a more meditative approach to her emotions.” Hannibal unlocks his car, leaning on its roof for a moment. “It will do her good to learn new skills and make new friends, Alana. Ones unrelated to her traumatic experiences.”

Alana’s expression remains tight: still unconvinced, but willing to be proved wrong. “I hope so.”

“Have faith in your patient, Dr. Bloom,” says Hannibal, watching his own breath steam in the air around him. “I am certain that Abigail will reach out when she feels safe to, in her own time.”

Though not necessarily to *Alana.*

It doesn’t look good. As a follow-up to the family killing in Maine and because, apparently, it’s a slow week for true crime enthusiasts, *Tattlecrime* has posted an article about what theoretically might make children into killers - with a few hefty paragraphs dedicated to their ‘local expert, Abigail Hobbs: omega daughter of the (recently late) Minnesota Shrike. And inspiration for her father’s crimes.’

BABY BUNTING GOES A-HUNTING: RAISING A KILLER

Whether Lounds had weaselled the FBI’s working theory that the killers in their latest case are children out of a loose-lipped agent or figured it out herself - the woman is savvy enough for either option to be plausible -, the irritatingly persistent blogger has taken great pains to draw a comparison between Abigail Hobbs ‘once more violently declining an interview’ and the kind of child who might kill their own mother in cold blood. Padding the bullshit out nicely with some of the usual drivel that gets trotted out when people want to point fingers at a child or youth that doesn’t fit into the socially-acceptable, usually neurotypical, mould. Do

they have friends? Will they hug you goodnight? Are they cruel to animals? ('And lest we forget, dear readers, the Shrike - and his daughter - were hunters.')

The sidebar links to another article haranguing Jack Crawford and the FBI in regards to the lack of advancement in the case of the tableau in Patterson Park: *THE PAGODA PUZZLE: WHERE'S THE RIPPER?*

The hunt for the Chesapeake Ripper, Lounds is keen to remind everyone, is going as well as it ever has - which is to say that the FBI and other law enforcement agencies have learnt nothing new since the *last* time the Ripper killed someone, so the Ripper is still at large and will likely kill again. *If,* Lounds snidely suggests, the body found in the Pagoda is even a Ripper kill, as the FBI maintains (but refuses to publicly announce) it is. The Ripper usually stages his kills in rapid succession, and hasn't it been a few *weeks* since the body was discovered in the park?

Jack Crawford, head of the BAU, would neither confirm nor deny that a terrifying *new* killer might be terrorising Baltimore when questioned by Lounds ('this intrepid reporter'), but 'Ripper or copycat, it seems that the FBI is no closer to catching the dangerous killer who desecrated Baltimore's beloved landmark with their gruesome display.'

It had been the Ripper. Unlike Lounds, Will had stood in that beautiful, flower-filled den at the top of the tower in the park, and he had *felt* the Ripper's version of romance offered out to him with a crown of lavender and a sweet bloody melody. No other killer has the same mix of whimsy, skill, and aesthetics as the Chesapeake Ripper, and the meticulousness of the crime scene had meant that, as far as Will knows, *weeks* later, the FBI still don't have a scrap of useful evidence from a building and body that should be covered in it. They still don't even have a name for their hollowed-out John Doe.

Anger, insult and outrage swirl around Will's belly like a firestorm, stung for himself, furious over Abigail. His fangs itch with the need to *bite* something, the back of his mouth thick with saliva that Will swallows, swallows, swallows again until eventually the constant swallowing makes him feel ill and he sweeps through to his bathroom to spit out the excess saliva into his sink. He walks straight into the door jamb returning to the main room of his ward, and *that* hardly improves his temper.

He wants to know how Abigail is. He wants to know what Freddie Lounds actually did to her. He *doesn't* want to have to contact Alana to find out, not after their already awkward meeting that lunchtime, and he's too angry not to snarl at her. Not to snarl at anyone he could call about this, his claws biting into his palms, into his own scalp as he rakes back the too-long curls flying into his face.

Naturally, the universe decides that that afternoon is a wonderful time for a slew of deliveries he'd ordered earlier in the week to show up at the hospital, and Will seethes - feeling every ounce of his current impotence and *loathing* it - as bags and boxes build up around him. The delights of online retail and impulse decisions.

Hannibal is, of course, perplexed when he arrives later in the evening to the sight of Will's room covered in deliveries, pausing a scant but telling millisecond in the doorway as his gaze sweeps across the cluttered ward. Across Will, with prettily-wrapped boxes all over his bed

and his lap, the mutinous, challenging slant of his jaw *daring* Hannibal to say the wrong thing.

Hannibal's head tilts delicately. Just so. "Has Christmas come early?"

"It's all for Abigail," says Will shortly. Corrects himself - "*Was* for Abigail."

"Was?"

"Thinking better of it." Will is a little overwhelmed by his own decisions as he lets his gaze sweep across the sea of bags and boxes his ward has turned into, and resentful that he feels overwhelmed. Taken as a whole, the gifts are a little over the top. He did this to himself. *Stupid.* "Wasn't thinking clearly - I was upset when I bought it."

Hannibal does nothing but stand there and look dreadfully understanding and Will hates him for it. Just a little.

Will sighs, his shoulders slumping as some of the fight Hannibal won't give him drains out of him. "Found new reasons to be upset now."

"You bare gifts when you're angry?" Hannibal takes a long slow prowl through the room, smoothly navigating his way around a few stacks of boxes and the furniture.

"Better gifts than teeth," Will says, and aches a little at Hannibal's sympathetic hum.

Hannibal sets his thermal bag down gently on the dining table, nudging aside a few smaller gift bags already sitting there. "What are they?"

"Clothes, mostly."

Sweaters, cardigans, socks and scarves. Sparkly hair-ties. A set of canary yellow pyjamas covering in pictures of cartoon dogs, *Paw-LEASE* emblazoned across the chest. Bunny rabbit slippers.

All things that might be in a girl's or young woman's wardrobe rather than something picked out for someone Alana's age.

Hannibal takes another look at the present-strewn ward, and then gives Will another *look.* Clearly spotting the brand labels on some of the gift-wrap. *These aren't all clothes.*

He's right.

Wearily, Will gestures to the box on his lap. The gift he's most unsure about. "Magnifying glass. Fly-tying gear."

"Teaching her how to fish," says Hannibal, approaching Will on the bed. Will can feel the weight of Hannibal's eyes on him: studying Will for a reaction. "Her father taught her how to hunt."

"That's why I thought better of it."

“Feeling maternal, Will?”

Will refuses to dignify that question with an answer. “No paternal thoughts of your own?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says simply, and, though he says it gently, it feels like a chastisement. He takes a seat on the end of Will’s bed, stacking up some of the boxes beside him - stationery gifts, for the most part. Candy and snacks. “Our good friend Dr. Bloom has advised against taking too personal an interest in Abigail’s welfare. You break it, you bought it.”

“Can’t break what’s already broken,” Will mutters dourly, and only just resists scooting back on the mattress away from Hannibal when the beta gives him a calm, patronisingly *indulgent,* look. As though Will is a cranky child, and Hannibal is the adult patiently waiting for Will’s temper tantrum to be done.

“Can’t you?” Hannibal hasn’t even taken his overcoat off yet.

Another spike of irritation stiffens Will’s back. He wants to claw all that *patience* off of Hannibal’s *face.*

The lids of Hannibal’s eyes lower. Watching him. “Tell me,” he says, and Will scowls at him. “Why were you so angry?” Then, “Why *are* you so angry?”

“As if you need *me* to tell *you*.”

Surely Will doesn’t need to preach to the choir of Dr. Hannibal Lecter: avid reader of *Tattlecrime.*com.

A nod: Hannibal’s suspicions confirmed. “Freddie Lounds.”

“She’s making a mockery of two separate FBI investigations, and she’s gunning for Abigail. Did Alana tell you?” Will asks, wondering if it had been their mutual friend or the blog article that had alerted Hannibal first. *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.*

“Did Alana tell *you?”* Hannibal counters, which isn’t helpful.

Will puts the fly-tying equipment aside so he can draw his legs up to his chest, his arms loosely clasped around his calves. “She was visiting here when she got the phonecall about Abigail. Something- Lounds grabbed her or something, and Abigail hit her with a chair.” Scowl turned even more fiercely to his kneecaps - “Should’ve hit her a bit harder.”

“That would hardly reflect well on Abigail.”

“And the bullshit that viper posted on her blog *does?”*

Hannibal sighs and, for the first time that evening, actually allows himself to look as though the situation at hand has affected him in some way. He’s tired. He looks tired, and he looks human, and so it’s easier to forgive him. “I’ve offered Abigail the services of my legal team. I expect the *Baby Bunting* article will be amended, if not taken down entirely, soon enough.”

Meaning Hannibal has spoken to Abigail.

Will frowns. “You call her?”

“I went to see her at Port Haven. She was asking for us.”

“...Us?” Will cannot help the wounded sound that escapes him. (*Us.* Including him.) No-one had told him -

“I explained to her that you were in hospital,” says Hannibal, and smiles when Will tentatively lifts his face from his knees.

Something small and very tender wraps its fingers around Will’s heart inside his chest and squeezes it gently. “She okay?”

“A little shaken, but not so much she hasn’t given the staff at the facility a piece of her mind for letting a strange alpha - and Ms. Lounds at that - sneak past them again. She’s talked Alana into letting her attend self-defence classes.”

“Yeah?” Will considers that, turning the little warm flush of pride he feels at Hannibal’s words over in his head. Imagining Abigail: fierce, capable, righteous in her anger. “Good for her.” He smiles with Hannibal for a few moments, sharing his pleasure and pride with the other man for their girl.

Alas, the memory of real life intrudes, and Will sighs again, unfolding all his limbs so he can reach for his phone and show Hannibal its screen.

Will still has *Tattlecrime* open in two browser tabs: one each for each of Lounds’ latest bullshit articles. (Much as Will hates to give Lounds any ad revenue, the woman has unfortunately made herself relevant to the conversation at hand.) “...Don’t think there’s anyone Lounds hasn’t offended in this one.”

Hannibal leans in to read - or, more likely, *re*read - the screen in Will’s hand. “She hasn’t mentioned you.”

Will shrugs and just passes Hannibal his phone, watching the beta’s frown grow as he flicks back and forth between the two articles. “Haven’t been around for her to mention for a little while. She’s had to resort to making direct jabs at Jack again, trying to cast doubt on the latest Ripper scene.”

“Implying that the FBI is incompetent in their hunt for the killer?”

“Implying that the FBI is incompetent in their hunt for *two* killers, because apparently it’s *obvious* to her that the scene in Patterson Park wasn’t the Ripper at all.”

Hannibal purses his lips, apparently as unimpressed by Lounds’ hypothesis as Will himself is. The rectangular reflection of Will’s phone screen glows like some kind of demon goat’s pupils in his dark dark eyes. “...Perhaps I’ll invite Jack Crawford to dinner at my home again to cheer him up.”

As though one of Hannibal’s home-cooked meals - however good they are - can make up for being persistently harangued online by the likes of Freddie Lounds. Trying to fix libel with

lasagne.

“I see how it is,” Will teases, stretching out one leg across the mattress so he can prod Hannibal’s nearest thigh with the tips of his toes. “You only want to hob-nob with the people in the limelight.”

“Celebrity friends do make for the best anecdotes,” Hannibal teases right on back.

Will *hmmm*s. “You going to dump me today as well?”

Hannibal stills. “You were dumped today?”

The prowling thing behind Hannibal’s eyes paces with all the restlessness Hannibal himself does not. Will can see it there, behind the keen attention of Hannibal’s gaze, like a hungry leopard waiting in the long grass.

(The hungry thing. Just a step removed.)

A slow shiver crawls up Will’s spine. It isn’t unpleasant.

“...Alana,” Hannibal eventually surmises, his mind having very obviously sorted through all the options Will currently has available to him before settling on the correct one. “I thought the situation between you both had already been resolved?”

Will gives him a little shrug, *yeah.* “We clarified a few things that needed clarifying. Agreed that we’re just friends. I’m too unstable for her right now, and she’s-” Will’s leg does a restless bounce on the mattress, accidentally kicking Hannibal. He pulls his foot back, apologetic. “Sorry. I don’t know.”

“Will.”

“We don’t quite fit,” Will asks ruefully, “do we? Me and her.”

Will has never quite fitted with anyone, and trying to force a match that wasn’t working in the past had only made his break-ups all the more difficult.

“It is difficult to have an *almost,*” Hannibal says. “An almost-win. An almost-lover. An almost-friend. A could-have-been, just out of reach.”

“Regrets made up of sometimes metaphorical millimetres.” Will sighs, rolling his shoulders back to stretch his spine. “Try - ‘or wonder, till it drives you mad,/ What would have followed if you had.’ ”

Hannibal waits patiently for him to be finished before giving him back his phone. “Are you still wondering?”

“No.” Will isn’t. “I dreamt of a future with her once - *Christ,* not that long ago -, but that’s not- it’s not the future I’m imagining when I close my eyes now. Still wouldn’t mind kissing her, but that alone isn’t enough.”

Hannibal *hmm*s, something deliberately, invitingly, naughty in his expression when Will glances up at him. “Far be it for me to condemn a little *kissing* -”

Will laughs, a brief bark of sound.

“But are you happy? In this future that you imagine?”

“I’m -” Will pauses, turning his gaze inward to investigate his own emotions. What do his hopes and dreams for tomorrow look like? “I’m *anticipatory.* Waiting for the rollercoaster car to reach the top of a peak.”

“Preparing for the plunge.”

“Scared and excited all at once.”

Will has a lot to look forward to. A new baby. Abigail - as a friend, a ward, a daughter? - to be escorted into a new phase of her life. Freedom from the hospital and encephalitis. Peace at last in his home, his little boat on the sea, surrounded by his dogs.

Almost by reflex now, Will’s hand falls to his abdomen - and he has to laugh at himself. (If it’s a little wet, Hannibal doesn’t say a word.) “I’m not even really showing yet. Maybe a little thicker around the middle, but I had weight to gain back anyway.”

The last sharp edges of Hannibal’s expression have at last faded until he looks like a beast that might be happy to slink in close for pets beside a warm fire, tender-mouthed with the claws all sheathed away.

“...May I?” he asks, and Will doesn’t know what he’s asking for until Hannibal holds out his hand as well.

Will lifts his own hand from his belly so Hannibal can close the distance between them and lay his palm there instead. Even through the fabric of Will’s shirt it makes a warm, solid anchor, right in Will’s middle, and all of Will’s breath shudders out of him.

When Hannibal lifts his gaze from Will’s abdomen, his eyes could swallow Will whole.

“If it’s any consolation to you, I have some things ordered for Abigail as well.”

Will can feel the slight prick around his eyeballs that suggests his irises may be shifting to gold, the world softening around its edges into a daydream haze. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

“Not at all,” says Hannibal, and gives one last stroke to Will’s belly with his thumb before taking his hand away. Smiling. “She has no-one else to spoil her, so why shouldn’t we?”

Why shouldn’t *we?* Will looks at all the things he has ordered for Abigail again, all the bags and boxes all over his suite. It’s not a lot, if it’s all a young omega might have in the world.

Even when Will’s dad hadn’t been able to afford much in the way of Christmas presents or Christmas dinner, Will had still had his father. Their home.

If Abigail doesn't like the gifts, Will can always take them back. Exchange them for something else, or give her the money to spend on herself. Because surely it would feel worse to be sitting in a hospital at Christmas and be given nothing at all.

"...She really asked for both of us?" Will asks Hannibal, badly wanting for it to be true.

"She did," Hannibal confirms, and that's- that's-

That's the best kind of ending to Will's pretty shitty day.

Chapter End Notes

Farcement: (stuffing) forcemeat. A uniform mixture of ground or sieved meats or fish combined with fats, seasoning and other flavouring ingredients. Forcemeat is used in the production of pâtés, sausages, galantines, roulades, terrines and more, and thus can be made in textures ranging from the very coarse to the very smooth depending on what the mixture is required for.
Various forms of vegetarian force'meat' also exist.

All those conversations characters *really* ought to be having with other characters but just *aren't* are just stacking up on top of each other now, aren't they?

Happy Lunar New Year! My fortune for this year is apparently a good one (the past few years have been ranked 'average' and 'mediocre' and *it shows*), so fingers crossed for brighter things to come.
If you think you've noticed slight changes to older chapters in this fic in the past few weeks, you're not imagining things! Nothing major has been added, but I fixed some typos and sentences that had been bugging me, and switched from using asterisks to AO3's coded line breaks to make it easier for people out there using screen readers.

Boldly going forward, 'cause we can't find reverse. - lyrics from *Star Trekkin'*, written by Rory Kehoe, John O'Connor, and Grahame Lister, performed by The Firm
Hope is the thing with feathers - Emily Dickinson, excerpt from (and title of) *Hope is the thing with feathers*
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. - William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene IV
Make your choice, adventurous Stranger,
Strike the bell and bide the danger,
Or wonder, till it drives you mad,
What would have followed if you had. - C.S Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*

ragoût

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal acknowledges that he might have let a few things slip out of his perfect control, and seeks to rectify the situation. Hannibal and Abigail go shopping.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Though it is only his second meal as a guest in Hannibal's home, Jack Crawford seems to be growing quite comfortable at Hannibal's table. He had remembered to spare a clumsy but well-meant compliment for the decorations around Hannibal's house and table before taking the seat Hannibal had offered him at the head of the table, and hummed in appreciation when Hannibal had laid their first course of the night before him: a classically simple sole meunière, served with sautéed spinach and shiitake mushrooms. A glass of an equally classic Sancerre blanc to wet the lips beside: sweet, dry, and intensely aromatic.

The peach note to the vintage that Hannibal had uncorked goes well with the sweet orange and sandalwood scent of the candles he had lit that night, placing the tall crystal candlesticks at intervals along the dinner table to better spread their scent throughout the room as they burn. Adding a deeper complexity to the aromatic bouquet of the room - and diffusing Jack Crawford's alpha scent of cedar, pepper and patchouli into something more agreeable to Hannibal's nose. A tactical compromise rather than elimination.

The fish is consumed in tender flaking forkfuls, threaded through with a conversation about the weather. Plans for the holidays discussed. Hannibal pours more wine: a red Bordeaux this time, a malbec from the vineyards of the Côtes de Bourg.

The French malbecs are more rustic and tannic than their South American relations but still carry the same deep vibrancy of colour and warm heat in taste. It makes them a fine accompaniment to the second course of homemade blood sausage and fava beans spooned generously onto each plate: filling food to fortify oneself against the season's cold.

"A modified boudin noir from Ali-Bab's *Gastronomie Pratique*," Hannibal explains, smiling graciously in response to Jack's exaggerated deep inhale of appreciation over his plate. Fresh cutlery already in hand.

"Ali-Bab?"

Hannibal returns to his own seat at the other end of the table with his own portion of their meal. "An engineer who, after losing his sense of appetite, spent the remainder of his life cooking for his brother. He developed a theory that great cultures meet their ends solely as a result of their cuisines becoming too decadent."

“You’ll meet *your* end if my wife catches you fattening up my liver,” Jack warns him jocularly, already cutting into his sausage.

“Perfect for *foie gras,*” Hannibal replies in the same light vein, unfolding his napkin to lay over his lap. Pleased by his guest’s obvious appetite. “You promised to deliver your wife to my dinner table.”

Jack huffs a brief laugh. “Well, we’re going to have to polish up our act. We can’t have you diagnosing our marital problems all in one fell swoop.” Cheerfully raising the chunk of boudin noir he has speared into his fork, “What am I about to put in my mouth?”

“Rabbit.”

“He should have hopped faster,” is Jack’s sage observation, already digging in with visible pleasure.

Hannibal chuckles. “Yes, he should have.”

And perhaps, if he could not be fleet of foot, have apologised after he ran into Hannibal at a farmer’s market some years prior rather than indulging in xenophobic insults.

“But fortunately for us, he did not,” says Hannibal, and savours his own first bite of the rich meat.

Outside, the annual Geminids shower has arrived at its peak in the crisp black of Baltimore’s sky. Debris from the asteroid 3200 Phaethon, the only children of Helios’ unfortunate child.

The myths tell that Phaethon had been desperate to prove his divine lineage by displaying his prowess in imitating his biological father, Helios. Unable to deny the pleading of his omega son, Helios had handed the reins of his chariot - that which drove the sun across the sky - to Phaethon. But Phaethon had been unable to control Helios’ mighty horses and the chariot had gone wildly off-course, scorching swathes of the earth as the sun was brought too close to the ground, freezing leagues elsewhere as the sun was driven away too far.

Only the timely intervention of one of Zeus’ lightning bolts had brought the wild ride to an end and spared the earth - though it had claimed Phaethon’s life as the cost.

Phaethon’s sisters, the Heliades, had gathered to mourn beside their brother’s body where it had fallen in the river Eridanos. After watching them grieve for four months, the gods had seen fit to turn the sisters into black poplar trees, weeping tears of amber that fell into the water.

Phaethon’s alpha lover, Cycnus, King of Liguria, had likewise mourned for the rest of his life on Eridanos’ banks, his grief surviving the metamorphosis the gods had enacted upon him in an attempt to relieve him of his sorrow. Moved by pity, Apollo, who had once gifted Cycnus with the talent for song, had transformed Cycnus into a swan - and further, after Cycnus’ perpetual dirge and lonely swan-song, into the constellation Cygnus.

Thus proving once more that one soul may metamorphose the universe around him and all the people in it. Humanity becomes animal at the extremes of emotion - or earth, immediately, meant only for the enrichment of others.

“Our friend Will suggested that my offer to host you tonight might be inspired by your celebrity allure,” Hannibal announces playfully after a few bites of his meal, extending his own alluring bait for his guest with the mention of Jack’s absent consultant. “You’ve been in the news, Jack.”

“Occasionally am,” is Jack’s sighed reply, taking a sip of his wine. “Rarely for the reasons I wish I was. But -” he shrugs, ever practical - “can’t make an omelette without cracking a few eggs.”

Indeed you can’t.

“How is Will?” Jack inquires as he sets his glass back down again, terrifically unsubtle. He won’t have missed that Will’s car is still parked outside of Hannibal’s home. “I know one of the members of my team has been to see him in hospital, though she didn’t mention which.”

Ms. Katz’s discretion - when she chooses to use it - is apparently to be lauded.

“Noble Hills,” says Hannibal, still choosy over what tidbits of information Jack Crawford is allowed to know. He is curious to see what the head of the BAU will do with his knowledge of Will’s location - if anything at all. “Will is still very sick, though he can occasionally manage visitors.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Jack says gruffly, a deeper note of cedar-soaked patchouli overcoming the scents of citrus and sandalwood for a few moments. “He’s been missed at Quantico.”

No mention of whether that absence had been felt in a personal or professional context - or who even, in particular, had felt it -, but apparently an honest enough observation.

Hannibal busies himself cutting his boudin noir into neat, even coins on his plate. “If you were to visit him, as a friend, I’m sure he’d appreciate it, Jack. Will’s taken to whiling away the hours between the courses of his treatment by mindlessly scrolling through *Tattlecrime* and watching daytime TV - and I can’t say which he’s more irritated about.”

Jack mulls over that suggestion as he takes another bite of their meal, turning the idea over in his mind as his teeth and tongue break down the food into fuel for his stomach and brain. “Freddie Lounds has publicly called into question whether the murder victim found in Patterson Park was one of the Chesapeake Ripper’s. Called *my* judgement into question for neither confirming nor denying that.” More exasperatedly - “She thinks there’s another killer about. On *top* of the family killer.”

“Will remains adamant that the scene in Patterson Park was one of the Ripper’s.”

“At the time, I agreed with him.”

“But no longer?”

“I still think it’s the most plausible theory,” Jack explains, “but we’ve had to open up the floor to other ideas, just in case.”

“Can’t be seen ruling out any other potential options too soon, no matter how improbable they might seem,” Hannibal commiserates. The delights of bureaucracy.

Jack sighs again. “Gut feeling isn’t admissible in court.” He takes another - deeper - swallow of his wine, the peppery taste to the dining room’s air flavoured more by the release of Jack’s irritated pheromones than the swirl of spicy wine in his glass. “Can’t be argued that if it really *was* the Ripper, he’s broken pattern.”

A sampling of sausage and fava beans poised delicately on the tines of his fork, Hannibal looks at Jack inquiringly.

“It’s been too long between kills. He usually drops three in less than two weeks. Factor in the unusually elaborate staging, there’s reasonable doubt.”

“I see,” says Hannibal, and sets down his fork again. “Either the Chesapeake Ripper has become wholly unpredictable, or the FBI has two killers of such a dangerous calibre on their hands.”

On the opposite side of the table, Jack grimaces. *Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.*

“Neither must be a comforting thought for you,” Hannibal acknowledges, and waits until Jack has set down his drink and picked up his cutlery again before, once more, taking up his own.

Tap- pause - *tap.* Curled up naked in the foetal position on his hospital bed again, Will lies very still and does his best not to think about the similarities between lobotomies and lumbar punctures - an association hard to avoid when the TV has been showing extremely shitty horror flicks all day due to the date, Friday 13th. Unable to forget the curious numbness radiating through from his spine to his front, courtesy of local anaesthetic. Trying not to dwell on just how much damage one person can do with a very fine needle.

It’s dark outside. Sutcliffe had decided to perform this latest spinal tap later than usual, so Will can rest afterwards without being disturbed by meals.

Will doesn’t feel particularly restful. His head is pounding.

“You should get a wonderful view of the meteor shower from here if you switch the lights off,” the attending nurse says to Will from beside his bed, clearly trying to be a comforting distraction whilst Dr. Sutcliffe fills up several vials with Will’s cerebrospinal fluid. She

gestures to the vast uncurtained blackness of the ward's windows, a line of night that Will can currently barely see due to having his head down and knees tucked up high to his chest. "It's supposed to be the peak tonight. The Geminids."

Will would have had a better view of the show back in Wolf Trap. That is not, however, his medical team's fault. "Figured most of the shower might be obscured by the city lights. Or the moon. Waxing gibbous tonight."

"Yeah?" The nurse squints out the window again, gaze angled at the yellow smudge of the moon. Disappointed. "Damn. I have a romantic 2am picnic planned."

Will huffs a soft laugh under his breath, letting himself get a little carried away by the distraction. "Hope you've got a waterproof blanket to sit on. With - uh, all the snow."

"My boyfriend's family is Eastern European. They're not allowed to sit on the ground over there - apparently it gives you piles. Gotta squat." The nurse sighs dreamily. "He has the most *fantastic* thighs."

A puff of annoyed clary sage from behind Will's back, distinct even over the sharp smell of antiseptic. *"Nurse."*

Will frowns as his conversational partner wilts, chastened, and approaches the bed again to take the vials Sutcliffe is holding out to her. *Sutcliffe, you wet blanket.*

Rustling. The nurse disappears with the vials to take them for analysis.

A tiny pad of gauze presses against Will's back - no doubt mopping up spilled liquids. Blood. (Should there be blood?) Sutcliffe's gloved thumbprint against Will's spine. "Strange to see you without your evening shadow, Mstr. Graham."

Hannibal? Will makes a face into his knees, unseen by the doctor behind him. Sutcliffe almost sounds *mocking,* an edge of malicious pleasure in his voice that doesn't make sense to Will unless there's something very obvious Will is missing.

"Well," an exaggerated sigh from Sutcliffe, and Will wishes he had the energy or the ability to roll over at the moment to look at the other man in the face, "I suppose we'll each just have to entertain ourselves tonight."

Sutcliffe is happy that Hannibal isn't there. He's happy that Hannibal isn't there to see *Will.* He's… jealous?

Will closes his eyes again, hundreds of recent memories flickering in technicolour obviousness on the backs of his lids. *Of course he's jealous.*

Ridiculous.

"I can hardly complain," Will says softly, forcibly sweet, lifting his head from his knees to lazily stretch out his neck against his pillow even though it hurts to do so. He can see Donald Sutcliffe's reflection in the windows now, glowering back at him. "Not when Hannibal

willingly gives up so much of his time to be here with me pretty much every *other* night of the week."

"Of course," says Sutcliffe crisply. "I've never known Hannibal Lecter to shirk his obligations."

"Nor his social schedule," says Will, and smiles - still sweetly, now sharp at the corners - at his doctor's reflection in the window. "That's truly one of the things I marvel at most about Hannibal. If he *really* wants to see you, he'll structure the rest of his itinerary around seeing you to make it work."

The dig lands home. Sutcliffe yanks his medical gloves off with a *snap* and slams the lights off as he storms out of the room. Perhaps trying to spite Will, by leaving him alone and mostly unable to move in the dark.

Despite still only being draped in a sheet on his lower half and nothing else, Will doesn't bother calling in anyone to help him. As the nurse had suggested, with the lights off, he can see the night sky better - and occasionally, across the deep dark blackness of the night, the streak of a particularly bright meteor radiating out from the constellation Gemini and between the other stars.

Will lets his mind drift as he watches the windows. At peace, for the moment, halfway between the stream in his mind and the stars.

The dishes disappear into the bubbles frothing the water in the sink, the detritus of dinner methodically wiped away from glasses, cutlery and tableware with a soft sponge and the circular motion of Hannibal's hand. Perhaps, he is self-aware enough to admit, a little more pettishly than he ought to.

The dish soap is still the mild, faintly yellow-tinged one that Hannibal prefers for overcoming the odours of a more strongly-scented meal, and his kitchen lights shine on the water, on the bubbles, casting a sepia rainbow over the sink, over the backs of Hannibal's bare forearms, a faint golden haze spelled at the corners of his eyes. A trickery of the light, mixing with the lemon scent of the air, the prickle of fruit and chemicals against the roof of Hannibal's mouth -

Hannibal, eyes drifting closed, can feel the soft pressure of familiar lips smiling against his lips. Tart and sweet, bittersweet, with *mousse au citron,* fond damp fingertips against his cheek.

The memory of Will stands unabashedly before Hannibal in the realm of Hannibal's Mind Palace: a perfect recreation from the night that Will had followed Hannibal into his Mount

Vernon kitchen after dinner: amorous, content and glowing with a good meal inside of him. Before Will had picked up the dishtowel, and before Hannibal had ground Will to two blinding orgasms against the wall.

The jar of lemons that Hannibal had stored that sweet memory in lies spilled behind the memory of Will all over Hannibal's kitchen island - very much out of place in his Mind Palace. The lemons, their jar, and *this* moment with Will… all belong in Will's atrium of light, where Hannibal had placed them. To find them in the kitchen here, now, without Hannibal deliberately walking the halls of his mind to retrieve that memory…

A line has been blurred between the kitchen in Hannibal's mind and the kitchen he stands in in reality, and the Will that stands there smiling in one may as well breathe in both.

Unbidden.

"I appear to have misfiled you," Hannibal informs the memory of his lover. Perturbed.

Will's smile stretches at the corners, relaxed and playful. "Associations come quickly," he says, with Hannibal's own voice.

A slap like the *slam* of an office door. The mindscape slides smoothly away from Hannibal like the wineglass that slips away from his fingers in the sink, sinking with a *thud* to the watery bottom. Thankfully unbroken.

Reality is thus: Hannibal stands alone in his kitchen, the scent of lemon dish soap in the air around him, with no lemons spilled over his counters. Thoughts… thoughts apparently disordered, at least in part, victim to the cross-contamination of subject matter and emotion.

Hannibal allows himself a single resigned sigh through his nose, expelling both breath and the tension that had been trying to gather itself at the base of his skull. He is calm again when he fishes the wineglass out from the water in the sink, and calm as he finishes washing, drying, and putting away the remainder of his dishes.

The calmness precedes him as he strides over to the servant's stairs leading up out of his kitchen, crouching down to press the hidden latch to the side of one step.

The latch releases the lock on a portion of the lower staircase, allowing Hannibal to smoothly raise that segment up using hidden rollers and lock it into place above. Revealed below is another staircase *down* - well-trodden, which Hannibal treads once more to descend into the familiar darkness of his basement.

It seems his organisational skills require some re-polishing. Luckily, Hannibal already has all the parts he might require to re-appropriate as he sees fit and give everyone a physical demonstration of his prowess.

The feathered stag stands at the foot of Will's hospital bed and watches him sweat and writhe, streaks of blurry meteorites shining in its black black eyes. The reflected numbers of Will's digital alarm clock melt down the clock face in a growing pool of water that seeps out of the device's case and spills over the edges of the night stand onto the floor - onto *Will,* joining the water that seeps out of his every pore into a sloshing sea around his twisting limbs.

Hot, wet, humid as a swamp, Will's nightclothes and bedsheets cling to him like thick mud and dead, trailing plant-life that has sunk to the bottom of the river. Tangling and constricting, pulling Will away with the inexorable undertow, Will, every second, a little less *there* than the second before. Here, the self, running like water that splashes in waterfalls over the boundaries of the bed.

The weight of all that water collapses into itself and Will collapses with it: the edges of his body blur and break, and all that water floods out over the bed, sluicing in one great crashing sheet to the floor.

Will wakes with a start in the thick darkness of his hospital suite, alone (no *stag*) and naked save for a single bedsheet and the slick film of sweat coating his skin. It's a disgusting enough sensation that, even disorientated and with his spine *twinging* with pain from the lumbar puncture, Will prises himself up from the bed to stumble into a cool shower.

He scrapes the hospital-issued shampoo through his hair with his forehead pressed against the hard, cold tiles surrounding the open shower, desperate to anchor himself with *something* solid. Keeping his eyes closed as he rinses off the suds so he won't see his skin sloughing off his bones like liquid and gurgling down the drain. Rinse, rinse, repeat. Dried. Dressed in clean pyjamas, towel around his shoulders to catch the water still rolling down his neck.

Still tired but unwilling to either crawl back into his sweat-soaked bed or ask the nurses to send in cleaning staff to fetch him some fresh sheets before the morning, Will takes up residence on the sofa in his room, switching on the TV and stretching out as a late-night(/early morning) talk show blathers on about *the* latest must-have home appliances. White noise.

He must fall asleep there, because one moment Will is semi-upright in darkness, vaguely listening to two women twittering away about an overpriced stand mixer, and the next it's light and he's fully horizontal on the sofa, squinting up at a nurse - Tancred - peering down at him with a resigned kind of judgement.

"Mstr. Graham?"

Will lifts one heavy arm in a gesture that could have passed for a semi-decent wave if only he hadn't let the limb immediately flop back down again and smack himself in the face. The TV is still blattering crap in the background, and Will's skull is echoing with the deep sonorous *boom-boom-boom* of a *pounding* headache.

“Don’t tell me you slept here all night,” says Tancred, so Will doesn’t. It’s useful to be so well-known.

The nurse only sighs at him and comes around the sofa to take Will’s vitals since Will is utterly failing to sit up, frowning down at the cool, clammy flesh of Will’s forearm in his grasp. Comparing it to the temperature reading from the thermometer he sticks in Will’s ear, and casting a silent look of acknowledgement at the still-damp towel flattened under Will’s shoulders and head.

“I think you’ve caught a chill.”

“Serves me right, I guess,” Will- Will *croaks*, an unexpected rasp in his throat more severe than its usual morning roughness. Huh.

Tancred eyes him and then the slice of plain wholemeal toast that is Will’s standard pre-breakfast snack. Dumps the toast, *bless him.* “...I’ll get them to send you some tea with honey in it. Something warm and soft for breakfast.”

“Painkillers. And no oatmeal,” Will implores. His head is thudding in time with the dust motes dancing in an offensively bright sunbeam streaking over the leather surface of the couch right in front of his face. “Please. Don’t think I can stomach it.”

He *really* doesn’t need to look at another Christmas elf blitzed and put in a breakfast bowl.

Tancred takes Will’s request to the nurses’ desk and Will’s attention drifts back to the bright flickering of the TV again. The local news is buzzing away with grim expressions being worn by both anchor and correspondent: there is, apparently, a clamour around Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church over in Bolton Hill. The place has been surrounded by the police, and the crime scene tape is already flapping in the crisp morning breeze as further press pull up in their vans. Very Christmassy.

Will pushes himself upright on the sofa.

Tancred takes note of the changed position when he returns - that, and the rapt attention Will has focused on the TV screen. “Something up?”

“There’s been a homicide,” Will rasps. Coughs. Clears his throat. “Bad one.”

Tancred frowns at the headline below the live coverage on-screen, the yellow ticker-tape marching along below it. All of it vaguely worded. “…It just says there’s been an incident?”

Will shakes his head (only very belatedly becoming aware that falling asleep on the sofa with wet hair has dried his curls in a weird tangled *squash* up against his cheeks). “Look at the police in the background, particularly the ones near the entrance to the church. Something’s freaked them out.”

A soft understanding *oh* from Tancred, noticing the same thing now that Will has pointed it out to him. “I forget you do this for a living.” Handing Will two paracetamol and a glass of water - “Can I get you a blanket?”

Will knocks back the tablets and water gratefully, managing a muttered *thanks* when Tancred brings him a clean fleece blanket from the cupboard to drape over Will's shoulders. Whisking away Will's abandoned damp towel to places unknown.

"There's the FBI," says the nurse when he returns, nodding to the TV where a small slew of *very* familiar vans have pulled up on the street in front of the church behind the correspondent.

Will isn't terribly surprised to see some equally familiar faces hop down out of one of the vans, getting up off the sofa so he can go and grab his phone. Snapping a timely picture of the tiny figure of Beverly Katz as she appears on the screen with Price and Zeller behind her, visibly tired and grumpy even at a distance.

Naturally, Will texts the photo to her immediately.

> *Congrats. You're on tv.*

A moment or so later, the little on-screen Beverly digs a hand into her pocket and fishes out her phone. Her head lifts to look up around her, obviously trying to spot *which* of the TV cameras has her in Will's sights as the wind blows strands of her dark hair back into her face.

After a minute or so she bows her head again, and Will's cell *pings* in his hand with Beverly's response.

>> *Star of the silver screen, thats me.*

Will, of course, cannot let that pass without comment.

> *Seasonal. Leading the wise men to baby Jesus?*

>> *HA. Its bad. Locals took one look and dumped this straight on us.*

>> *ttyl*

Unable to help the BAU forensics team from his current location - or life situation in general - , Will settles for tentatively tucking into the breakfast Tancred presents him with. There's the offered tea - cinnamon - with honey of course, but also a peach-and-some-other-kind-of-fruit smoothie. A small herb omelette with a side of crispy bacon (*bacon!*) that Will almost feels a little tearful over, and a stollen muffin cake.

Sipping, first, his tea and then his smoothie to wash away the ever-present taste of sour saliva in his mouth these days, Will is grateful for the lack of… *fruit-shaped fruit* with his meal. One of the handy-dandy infographics handed out to pregnant people at Noble Hills is a size chart for developing foetuses, with the healthy growing foetus' approximate size at each significant milestone listed by length, weight and closest comparable fruit/vegetable to those figures.

At 10 weeks, Will's little alien tadpole should be about 1 and ¼ inches long, roughly 0.14 ounces in weight, and approximately the size of a kumquat.

(...Will *may* have had to google what the exact specifics of a kumquat were. He now never wants to eat a kumquat.)

Along with being nobly comparable to a tiny Chinese citrus fruit, the tadpole's even teenier nails should be forming around this time, the infinitesimal loops and whorls of perfectly unique fingerprints taking shape on little stubby digits. Smaller-than-baby-sized teeth are hardening somewhere in the depth of Will's abdomen and fusing to a jawbone that's barely any bigger than them, and eyes - their eyelids still sealed closed - and ears will be shifting into place.

The kumquat-tadpole should be able to squint soon, smile and grimace and pout, and Will cannot help but wonder if he's cursed the poor thing with his own sharp mouth to frown with or whether the baby will inherit Hannibal's much more languorous sulk.

(What would one of Will's own scowls look like on a much younger and littler face? What would one of Hannibal's?)

I'm having a baby, is Will's constant circling thought. It seems impossible. It *feels* impossible, but Will has the ultrasound images to prove that his mind isn't playing tricks on him with this, his ever-thickening middle.

Where the fuck had 10 whole weeks gone? It hardly seems enough time to grow a kumquat let alone something that has *fingerprints*.

Will finishes his smoothie with a shuddering sigh, and then promptly reaches out to grab the remote and switch off the TV. The FBI have disappeared inside the church in Bolton Hill already to discover whatever horrors await them there, and the news is still running the same lot of *nothing* about it.

As Will cannot be there to help Jack's team, he has better things to do with his time - and, with his stomach cooperating with him this morning and keeping his nausea at bay, 100% refuses to allow the news to ruin a decent plate of crispy bacon.

…Pregnancy really does alter one's priorities. Or, at the very least, Will surmises as he chomps down on a forkful of hot eggs and bacon, free people to just say *fuck it* more often.

Abigail closes the book she'd been reading - a Flannery O'Connor anthology, likely loaned to her by Alana -, her nose scrunching up in questioning doubt as she looks over at Hannibal where he sits in the chair beside her bed at Port Haven.

“I don’t think I’m allowed to leave unless Dr. Bloom signs me out. They’ve been pretty fussy about that ever since I climbed the fence.”

As though they both don’t know that Abigail escaping from Port Haven’s grounds - like she had the time she had visited Hannibal’s office - had hardly been an isolated incident.

The young omega is comfortable enough in Hannbal’s presence now that she hadn’t made much of a protest to Hannibal telling her she could remain where she was when he had entered her room, lying comfortably on her stomach on the bed, rather than getting up to greet him. Her feet swing idly up in the air behind her, a picture of - only somewhat feigned - ease.

Abigail’s socked toes are kept warm by brown slippers embroidered with teddy bears today, and the rest of her seems cosy in jeans and a pastel scarf. A soft ombré sweater.

Hannibal sits beside her like a sharply-edged shadow at sunset: his three-piece suit all black that afternoon, his shirt beneath red in plain contrast. “I’ve made arrangements. You could say… I’m one of your guardians.” He smiles at the startled lift of Abigail’s eyebrows - highlighting the soft brush of silvery eyeshadow over her lids.

Abigail’s lips are painted with the sheen of semi-translucent lipgloss in sweetheart pink below, the product likely courtesy of the small bag of personal cosmetics that Abigail had swiped from her home in Minnesota during their eventful visit.

Had Dr. Bloom also been the one to suggest her patient start wearing make-up (again)? Checking off another point on the - somewhat sexist - list for signs of improving psychological health in women and omegas. Or had the impetus come from Abigail herself?

“Besides,” Hannibal adds, “Dr. Bloom is aware of our plans for cookery classes.”

At any rate, the gentleman staffing Port Haven’s main reception had been *more* than happy to gossip about how the FBI had called up Dr. Bloom earlier that morning and asked her to consult on a case for the rest of the day, very likely ‘whatever the *hoo-ha* is over at that church on the news’, so there is no danger of Alana interrupting Hannibal’s plans any time soon.

Abigail looks dubious still. “So we’re going to your home?”

“Initially,” says Hannibal. “I thought you might like to visit Will in the hospital after our lesson. We can feed him our results, and I’ll have you back before bedtime.”

“Can I-” Abigail hesitates, pulling back her lower lip between her teeth to chew on it anxiously for a moment, lipgloss forgotten - “can I spend the night? I don’t like sleeping here.” Her gaze drifts downwards to the mattress she’s still laying on, to the bedlinen that still smells more like hospital-grade detergent than her. “I have bad dreams.”

She might sleep better had she spread her mother’s old blanket out over the hospital-provided sheets, scented by her dead family, by herself and Will - but that, Hannibal assumes, has probably been tucked away with her stuffed rabbit toy into her nest instead.

“You have to sleep in your own bed,” Hannibal says, firm but gentle.

Abigail’s scent repines with sad resignation: all soft notes of musk and dampened fir, rain over the hay barn. Her voice equally distant in memory: “This isn’t my bed.”

She is correct, of course.

Hannibal leans in, resting his elbows on his thighs. “Tell me about your bad dreams.”

The prompt brings Abigail sharply back to the present place and moment, her breath shuddering out of her as she composes herself. Looking away from Hannibal, down at her folded hands either side of the book in front of her. “I- I had one where Marissa was sending me picture texts. Like…” she shakes her head, disbelieving, “crime scene photos.” She blinks. Rapidly. Fluttering. “Of Nicholas Boyle,” fluttered blinking again - but no tears, no omega gold streaking through her irises, “gutted.”

“How you left him.”

Unprepared for the bluntness, Abigail stares at Hannibal - and then away again, trembling. No counter-argument at hand for the truth they both know.

“Even though she’s dead, I’m afraid Marissa’s gonna tell everyone I killed him and they’ll think I’m just like my dad.” Abigail inhales sharply, shuddering again, before visibly steeling herself. Looking once more to Hannibal, her eyes seeking his for reassurance. Comfort. “Sorry.” Wobbly-legged now, Abigail pushes herself upright on the bed, onto her knees, staring at the safe blue blandness of her little ward’s walls. “Can’t really talk about this in group.”

Hannibal sits back in his seat to match her, studying the girl in front of him. Assessing her vulnerabilities, her emotional belly laid bare to the more dominant beast in the room. “You don’t have that luxury, Abigail.”

Abigail’s shoulders droop - though just for a moment. Given confirmation that, if she wants some semblance of a future free from her father’s shadow, she must continue down the path she has already chosen for herself, Abigail draws up the strength she requires from her core, from that streak of stubbornness Hannibal has noted in the omega before. The determination to not only live, but *thrive.* At any cost.

This new philosophy sits at odds with society’s expectations for a young omega woman - for the victim/daughter of a serial killer at that. Abigail is still coming to terms with the consequences of her new practicality, moving through her fear and moralistic concerns to acceptance. Flourishment. An understanding of just what she is capable of when she puts her mind to it.

“I just have to get used to lying,” Abigail says resignedly, and primly slips off her bed and past Hannibal to go and fetch her coat. Stepping out of her teddy bear slippers.

Hannibal stands as well to join her, his own coat already folded over his arm as he returns the chair he’d been sitting on to the corner of the room where it belongs. “You only have to lie

about one thing. And, when you're with me, you don't have to lie about anything."

Abigail sighs at him, pulling on her coat. "In the dream, I wonder how I could live with myself knowing what I did." Offering no objection when Hannibal moves her borrowed Flannery O'Connor anthology over to her desk by the ward's tiny window, too busy pulling her loose hair out of her coat's collar.

Hannibal glances at her, sees she needs no help from him in gathering up the rest of her things to depart, and moves over to the door. "And when you're awake?"

Abigail's expression turns thoughtful, her fingers still smoothing through the flyaway strands of her hair. "...When I'm awake, I know I *can* live with myself." She trails after him in her socked feet, snagging her boots waiting by the door. "And I will just get used to what I did."

So far along in her understanding of the way the mind works already.

"...Does that make me a sociopath?" Abigail asks. Curious, rather than afraid.

"No," says Hannibal, and smiles at her proudly. "It makes you a survivor." Opening the door for Abigail to go first.

Abigail is glad of her boots when they step outside, their conversation about *Tattlecrime*'s insulting *Baby Bunting* article accompanied by the *crunch crunch crunch* of their footfall along the frosty snow-dusted path to the parking lot.

Hannibal's lawyer has already been in touch with the impertinent Ms. Lounds and politely threatened the true crime blogger with legal action if the offending article is not amended to remove all mention - including implication - of Abigail Hobbs if it is not taken down entirely. Ms. Lounds had promised to have the article amended by the end of Saturday, and has apparently taken the additional hint that any further badgering of Miss Hobbs is likely to result in a charge of harassment being filed against her.

Abigail's smile is a warm thing on a chilly December afternoon. She slides into the front passenger side of Hannibal's Bentley with obvious relief, *ooh*ing in pleasure when Hannibal reaches over to turn on the heating for both their leather seats. "You really think she'll leave me alone now?"

"For a little while, at least," Hannibal tells her honestly, "but not for as long as you might hope. Your name is still bound up with your father's crimes, Abigail, and the crimes of those he inspired."

Abigail sighs. "I googled myself," she announces as Hannibal drives them smoothly away from Port Haven. "I know Dr. Bloom didn't want me to, but I'm sick of knowing that people are talking about me everywhere and I don't get to hear what they say, never mind be part of the conversation. How can I defend myself from accusations if I don't even know what the accusations are?"

"You know what the accusations are," says Hannibal simply, and doesn't miss the way the girl sitting in the passenger seat beside him flinches. They should work on that response of

hers. “Abigail, I would caution you against trying to engage with the many debates about yourself on the internet. In my opinion, you are, of course, entitled to know what others are saying about you, but you have no obligation to explain yourself simply because the faceless masses demand it of you. They spew vitriol because you are a story to them rather than a person, and hurting you would bring them pleasure. Don’t give them it.”

“What do *you* think I should do?”

“Read only enough as to stay informed, and then disengage.”

Abigail will drown herself in other people’s hatred if she allows their opinions to make cement shoes for her feet.

Hannibal keeps his eyes steady on the frosty road in front of him as his companion mulls over his advice. “May I ask how you managed to run a search on yourself in the first place?” As far as he had been aware, Alana has - still - been limiting the kind of information her patient has access to.

Abigail shuffles a little in her seat. Guilty. “Dr. Bloom gave me one of the facility’s old tablets that no-one was using so I could look up crocheting videos and stuff, like she said she would. She’d put parental controls on it, but I factory reset the tablet and that wiped those out.”

An outcome that Alana really *should* have anticipated before handing any basically tech-literate teenager physically unsupervised access to a digital device.

Hannibal’s lips quirk upwards in amusement - enough of a smile that Abigail stops fretting so much beside him and anxiously tugging at the cuffs of her coat’s sleeves. Expecting him to reprimand her or immediately rat her out. “Resourceful.”

Abigail lets out an involuntary startled - but pleased - little chirp. And then tries to cover up the sound with a soft *heh.*

“How goes the crocheting?”

Abigail seems happy for the change in topic, perking up again. “Dr. Bloom hasn’t managed to get me any of the hooks or wool yet, so for now I’m just watching beginner’s videos. Learning the stitches.”

Hm. “Something that would be a great deal easier to do were you able to try and replicate them in real life.”

“Well, yeah, but -” Abigail shrugs. “Dr. Bloom’s pretty busy. I’m just grateful that she agreed to the self-defence and cooking lessons, and she gave me the tablet to learn while I’m waiting on the other stuff.”

“You’re truly interested in learning how to crochet?”

Abigail ponders the question for a few moments. “...Yeah, I think I am. It gets cooler the more you look into it.” She brightens a little. “You know machines can’t crochet? The

stitches are too complicated for machines to replicate, so everything crocheted has to be handmade."

"Every piece wholly unique," says Hannibal, and Abigail nods. "There's a yarn and fabric crafts store a few streets away from my home. We'll make a stop there en-route and see if we can find you the supplies that you need."

"Oh, I didn't mean -" Abigail blushes pink, taken aback - *embarrassed* - judging by her scent. Tugging on her coat sleeves again. "Thank you, but I wasn't hinting for you to buy me anything."

Hannibal knows that she hadn't been - which is why, in this particular case, he had offered. "If you're excited for a new hobby, why wait for an unspecified tomorrow for the tools when you can have them in your hands today?"

Abigail struggles for an answer to that that is honest but not impolite, too wary of sounding ungrateful to Hannibal after the favours he has already performed for her. All teenage *um*s, trying to articulate her feelings. "I don't- I don't think I can say that I don't want to take advantage of you at all and your generosity, Dr. Lecter, because I *do,* and I *have,* and you know that, but I don't. Want to push my luck. When I didn't mean to."

"You may ask anything of me, Abigail," Hannibal graciously tells his young companion, "as long as you ask for it politely, in hope rather than presumption." Abigail is still chewing on her lower lip, obviously conflicted by something. "You have a question on your mind. Ask."

Another teenage *um,* but Abigail plucks up her courage to voice her thoughts. "…You're not trying to court me, are you?"

Hannibal gives his companion the courtesy of not laughing at her question; it is, after all, a valid concern for a young unbonded omega with no family to defend her. And Hannibal *has* been presenting Abigail with gifts.

"No," Hannibal says gently, smiling as the tension that had been gathering in Abigail's shoulders immediately seeps away again. "Not that you are not a lovely young omega, Abigail, but you are a trifle too young for me. I do hope, however, that you might consider me your friend."

After a considering beat, Abigail gives him a tiny nod and an even tinier, still somewhat awkward smile. Aware, whatever her personal feelings on the matter are, that Hannibal's friendship is not something that it would be wise for her to decline.

As they leave Baltimore's suburbs and drive closer to the city centre, the Christmas decorations on the buildings that they pass grow ever more elaborate and expensive. Abigail's face lights up with a childish pleasure at the sight of the seasonal street-lights, still waiting for the evening's twilight before they are switched on, at the shop windows dressed with trees and baubles, the gardens turned into grottos of twinkling fairy lights and elegant reindeer.

The yarn and fabric crafts store that Hannibal brings her to has Christmas trees with handmade knitted and crocheted baubles in its windows, cosily darned stockings stuffed with candy canes hanging from railings inside. Quaint.

With Hannibal's blessing for Abigail to pick out whatever she wants, the proprietor of the shop is more than happy to take the now excited Abigail under her wing and talk the younger woman through everything she'll need for her first few projects as a crocheting novice. Showing off the different crochet hook sets with different coloured and patterned handles, and disappearing to a back room of the shop to find Abigail a particular set with lavender-coloured handles covered in silhouettes of little white rabbits hopping around crescent moons.

A few beginner's guides suitable for Abigail's dreams of crocheted scarves, shawls, and slouchy hats stack up with the hooks by the cash register after Abigail has discussed the amount of time and wool those projects might take her. An instruction manual on how to create and decorate amigurumi, little crocheted toy figures, after Abigail professes her interest in creating those in particular. An extensive sewing kit: enamel thimbles, scissors and more hooks, needles and thread.

The shop's yarn is all hand-dyed, certified organic merino wool, and, when Hannibal gently urges her to pick as much as she wants, Abigail gathers up skeins and skeins of the stuff in every colour that takes her fancy - and a few ombré-dyed skeins beside.

When Hannibal hands over his debit card to pay for it all Abigail may as well be glowing with happiness, unable to stop herself from repeatedly peering into the half a dozen tote bags she's now carrying as if to check that all her new belongings really are still there.

The only person who could be happier than Abigail at that moment is the shop owner who has just landed herself an enormous sale, but Hannibal can hardly begrudge the woman her joy after her assistance with all of Abigail's whims and needs - and the way she is still smiling at Abigail now, apparently delighted to have introduced a novice to her own hobby. "Merry Christmas!"

Abigail beams a "Merry Christmas!" back in reply, still giddy with happiness as Hannibal steers her and her bags to the door and the Bentley parked on the street outside. She's still chattering away about her plans for amigurumi, and, for a moment, Hannibal is transported back to the days when he had had a much younger but equally as excited little girl at his side extensively lecturing him on her plans for dressing up her favourite paper dolls in all the new outfits she had just instructed Hannibal to draw for them.

The eager chattering pauses when Hannibal takes the bags from Abigail's hands to place them in the Bentley's trunk. Abigail hovering, self-conscious. "...You don't think it's a little silly to be so excited about making little dolls? At my age?"

The last bag goes in, and the trunk's lid is brought down.

"I wasn't aware," says Hannibal, "that there was an age limit on doing things that make you happy."

Tentatively, Abigail smiles again. Her nose is already pink from the cold. “Feels like they put limits on everything these days.”

“All the more reason then for you not to arbitrarily limit yourself,” Hannibal tells her before directing them both back inside his car.

After breakfast, a determined attempt to comb out some of the *disaster* from his hair, and the cleaners have come in to remake Will’s bed for the day, Will gives the world a(nother) silent *fuck you* and goes back to sleep. He’s stressed and tired and Beverly hasn’t texted him back, and he can’t think of a single reason why he *needs* to be awake this Saturday morning anyway.

The ever-cheerful nurse, Carla, wakes Will up a few hours later to take his vitals and bring him lunch: the spicy cinnamon tea with honey again, lamb and spinach wraps, and a warm date and carrot pudding dusted with powdered sugar and a heavy dollop of natural yoghurt. Tasty - especially since Will eats the pudding first.

Will eats, shuffles off to take a piss and wash his hands, and clambers back into his bed again so that Carla can hook him up to his afternoon dose of steroidals.

Jack Crawford calls Will’s cell just as the first drips of the drugs start to enter Will’s bloodstream.

Half-expecting the quieter *blip* of a text, Will frowns down at the loud buzzing of his phone, and then frowns even harder when he spots the familiar - and unwelcome, given the context Will knows it’s in - name flashing on its screen.

Will doesn’t pick up, and, a few moments after the buzzing ends, his cell *blip*s with the notification of a voice message.

Will ignores it, and turns off both the sound and vibration on his phone so he can boot up his laptop instead. Loading the *Barks & Bones* livestream of his dogs' room, Will’s mood immediately lightens at the sight of Harley sprawled out on one of the dog beds there, snoring away as Buster zooms in and out of the little doggy door nearby with a rope toy in his mouth, occasionally pursued by a slightly confused Ellie.

Buster zooms out of the room again, still followed by Ellie. A few moments later, Buster zooms back *inside* the room again - this time carrying what looks to be a gentleman’s shoe in his mouth.

Off-screen, an unfamiliar someone yells *Buster!* with an exasperation Will knows all too well.

Buster remains unrepentant, and takes a seat on one of the dog beds to begin diligently chewing on his prize's leather toes. Ellie trots in shortly afterwards to join him - though not before accidentally smacking her brother in the head with the rope toy she seems to have claimed at last.

Will - now miles away from the flashing screen of his cell phone and all the stress it might bring - *laughs*. He laughs so hard, in fact, Carla feels compelled to stick her nose back into her room and check on him, but she just smiles and shakes her head with a motherly *don't make yourself sick now*, bustling out again.

It's not even that funny.

God, Will misses his stupid dogs.

Chapter End Notes

Ragoût: (from Middle French *ragoûter*, 'awaken/revive the appetite') a main-dish stew of which there are many different recipes and varieties. Ragoûts are usually made with a mixture of meat and vegetables slow-cooked over a low heat - but may be made without either meat or vegetables.

Sole Meunière
Date and carrot pudding

The Geminids Meteor Shower runs annually from approximately December 7th to the 17th. Their peak in 2013 was on the night of December 13th and in the early morning of the 14th.

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. - William Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part II*, Act 3, Scene 1

Hey there. Sorry it's been a hot minute since the last update, but finally getting this one out today was my birthday gift to myself. Here's to birthday cake, vodka, and Hannibal up to no good.

fondue

Chapter Summary

Abigail's afternoon turns out to be a trip in more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The apron Hannibal usually reserves for Alana's use in his kitchen is somewhat large on the shorter and more slender-waisted Abigail. Though it sits in a good place across her chest, its hem drapes past her knees, and its laces, when tied at the back, make for an excessively over-dramatic bow. Abigail is quite insistent on the bow, refusing to loop the apron strings around her front like Hannibal does with his simply so she can feel the weight of the bow *bounce* in the small of her back as she patters around the kitchen. A svelte fawn pursued by a white wispy butterfly, its wings trailing like a dizzy little snow-flurry behind her.

After examining the feathers and origami flowers decorating the small Christmas trees in Hannibal's dining room with some fascination - and inquiring if Hannibal had folded the paper roses himself (he had) -, Abigail is less than thrilled to be assigned the task of peeling potatoes. She had, she confesses somewhat resignedly as she picks up the peeler, hoped that Hannibal might be teaching her how to cook something *interesting,* having had her curiosity thoroughly piqued by the elaborate *mise en place* Hannibal had arranged on his kitchen island.

Hannibal busies himself with pouring piping hot water from his kettle into the infuser of a glass teapot, lingering for a moment over the open lip to watch as the dried tisane ball he had placed inside of the pot blossoms and opens like a flower in the water.

An earthy smell fills the kitchen, green and sour.

"And by 'interesting' you mean…?"

Abigail colours and ducks her head behind the forward swing of her hair. She had *meant* something that required more complicated preparatory techniques than peeling a root vegetable.

Hannibal only hums, placing the lid on the teapot and allowing his tisane to steep as he returns to the opposite side of the kitchen island. "All building, be it of skills or physical architecture, requires solid foundations. Fancy flourishes are a great deal more impressive when underpinned by a good grasp of the fundamentals."

"Basics first then," says Abigail, resigning herself to her fate. "Got it. Slicing, dicing…"

“Washing up,” adds Hannibal - solely to see the expression that immediately slides across his companion’s face: *disgusted teenager*. “You will, I’m sure, be glad to know that I have a dishwasher to assist with most of that task.”

“‘*Most* of that task’?” Abigail inquires - and then answers herself before Hannibal can. “Of *course* you’ve got a bunch of stuff that’s super old or delicate or isn’t dishwasher-safe. Who needs fancy flourishes when you can plate dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets on Count Dracula’s own dishware?”

About to pick up a potato of his own to join Abigail in peeling, Hannibal pauses. “...I’m sorry to disappoint you, but none of my china is Translyvanian.”

“He probably imported.”

“...A valid supposition,” Hannibal concedes, bending his head to his own task with a knife. “I shall be sure to examine my dishware for any vampiric provenance. The dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, however, are still out of the question.”

Abigail laughs and then seems shocked at herself for laughing, covering her mouth with a starch-damp hand as she remembers herself, her life and situation. The vibrancy drains from her, leaving in its place a pale shadow of woe.

“You can laugh, Abigail,” Hannibal tells the girl gently, noting the soft sad shift in her scent. “No-one will prosecute you for having a little fun every now and then.”

“...Sometimes it feels like they’ll give it a try anyway,” Abigail mumbles around her fingers, before wilting at the look Hannibal gives her. Her hand drops, and she abandons a potato, half-peeled, on the counter. “Sorry.”

“It’s important to know when it’s time to turn the page. Have you thought about applying for schools?”

A ripple of wounded petulance. “My dad killed girls at all the schools I applied to,” Abigail says, so insincerely, airily nonchalant her words might as well land like a gauntlet thrown down on the table between Hannibal and herself.

She smiles when Hannibal pauses again and looks at her: sweet, sad, and sharp. Defensive of her grief. A gold glare in her eyes above it, daring Hannibal to pick up that gauntlet and challenge her.

“...Perhaps that can wait then.”

“It’ll have to wait a while. I’ve missed half of my senior year.” Abigail sighs, rubbing her hands on the front of her apron. “No Snowflake Ball for me. Or prom.” She tilts her head, considering that. Apparently just realising what that means to her. “*Huh.”*

Hannibal must confess that there is still some mystery to the modern social rites of American adolescence for him. His youth had been in a different time, and in many different places. “Were you looking forward to the senior year dances?”

“Not really,” says Abigail. “Just didn’t expect not to have the opportunity to go to them if I wanted. My mom- my mom started making noises in the summer about the Snowflake Ball; she wanted to do the whole mommy-daughter thing with dress shopping. She was Snowflake Queen back when she was in high school.”

“Had you ambitions to follow in her footsteps?”

A shake of Abigail's dark hair. “Not my thing. But she would’ve been happy to have pictures of me in a nice dress to hang on the wall.” Her voice softens with sadness. “I never even told her I was trying to graduate early. Took as many classes as I could for the credits.”

Trying to escape the grasp of her father - and, perhaps, inadvertently speeding up the bloody climax of her daily life.

“You must have had a lot of homework,” Hannibal observes, beginning to chop his potato into perfect half-inch cubes. “Did neither of your parents comment on the amount of work you were bringing home from school?”

Abigail shrugs. “Just told them it was the amount all high schoolers had these days. Especially those with a bunch of AP classes. They didn’t know any better. Dad was happy I had something to keep me in at nights, said it was good that I was hitting the books instead of wasting my time out at parties with underage drinking and drugs. Said I was his *smart girl.”* Her mouth - and tone - twists with a resigned kind of bitterness. “I wasted my time with all those credits, didn’t I?” She looks at Hannibal. “I’ll have to get a GED.”

“You could get a GED, if that is what you want. Alternatively, Minnesota has several online academies. I’m sure we could find you one that accepts most, if not all, of your course credits so far.”

Abigail frowns, confused but interested. “…I thought those were just for students with special needs.”

“Only in the sense that each individual student has a more personalised approach to their education than what public school may provide,” says Hannibal. “The curriculum is tailored around other scheduled commitments, health, and learning needs.”

His guest gives him a terribly teenage, excruciatingly dubious, look.

“I know the stereotypes, Abigail,” Hannibal says firmly. A gentle reprimand. “Online academies aren’t just for the difficult or less gifted people. Many young prodigies prefer their advanced courses, and a significant portion of their student bodies are made up of individuals with particular health needs that make it difficult for them to attend a physical school, including young alphas and omegas with complicated rut or heat cycles.”

“I’ll… I’ll google it,” says Abigail. Which is all any adult can ask of a bright young thing they hope will not squander their opportunities: to explore every avenue available to them and make an educated choice. The gold wavers and begins to fade in her eyes. “Maybe talk about it with Dr. Bloom?”

The question is not quite a rhetorical one. After the scolding, Abigail is seeking Hannibal's approval. Conditioned to require blessing for her actions from the paternal figures in her life, for her own safety.

Hannibal gives it to her with a brief nod, and Abigail smiles again, her back straightening.

"I want to work for the FBI."

Hannibal pauses again, turning slightly so that he can look at Abigail more directly. He's a little surprised, he'll admit, at Abigail's proclamation, but perhaps the little sneak-peek her personal experience has given her behind the curtain has aroused her interest in what the FBI do and encouraged her to want to help people - or simply whetted her appetite for the kind of power joining such an organisation could grant her. Either option is an interesting one, as is the thought of Abigail Hobbs as the FBI's newest and brightest agent.

Another *friend* for Hannibal in the bureau.

Half a beat too slow, Hannibal remembers to smile supportively. Indulgently. "I would certainly feel safer if you were in the FBI," he says, going back to chopping. "Protecting my interests."

Abigail watches him closely, her weight shifting restlessly from one foot to the other. Butterfly bow bobbing on her back. "They wouldn't let me though, would they?" Her jaw sets, obstinately grumpy. "Because of what my dad did."

"Only if they believe that's in your nature, too."

"Nature versus nurture." A very put-out flash of omega fangs.

Hannibal hums, reaching for another potato. "We don't invent our natures, Abigail. They're issued to us, with our lungs and pancreas and everything else. Can't fight it."

Abigail wilts. "...I don't know what my nature is." Too accustomed to defining herself by her father's nature.

Hannibal gives her the courtesy of his full, serious attention, waiting until Abigail's eyes are slowly, hesitantly, lifted to his own before he speaks. "You're not your father's daughter. Not any more."

Abigail goes even quieter than before, looking away again to hide the watering of her eyes, blinking rapidly to try and hold back her tears. Trying to distract herself with the scenery of Hannibal's kitchen - and, perhaps, avoid the snare of Hannibal's eyes again, his gaze tracking hers, his head tilted to hook her.

Hannibal is not wholly unsympathetic to her plight; he, too, knows what it is to lose both parents at an impressionable age under violent circumstances. But they can never be the same: each individual processes such an event in a different way, undergoing a unique metamorphosis that is fascinating to observe - and, perhaps, influence - from an outside perspective.

“What if it weren’t so painful any more,” Hannibal asks, “to think of him?”

Abigail blinks again - confused now. Again. Old enough already to know that pain is simply part of being alive: impossible to be rid of altogether. “...My dad?”

“Yes,” says Hannibal, aware he has his young guest’s full attention again. Asking, delicately, “Have you ever tried psilocybin?”

“*Mushrooms*?” Abigail is taken aback. “That’s…” her eyes track across the food and dishware currently sitting out on Hannibal’s countertops, landing on the teapot that Hannibal had filled and abandoned earlier. Still releasing its earthy, pungent smell into the air, “what’s in the tea?”

“Yes.” Hannibal nods, wiping his hands dry on the apron covering his thighs as he walks around the kitchen island towards the teapot. Still leaving a counter between Abigail and himself, a simple barrier to make her feel safer. “There are those psychiatrists who believe that altered states could be used to access traumatic memories.”

Abigail purses her lips, giving a little toss of her hair. Dismissive. “I have all the access to traumatic memories I need. *Unlimited* access.”

Hannibal lifts the lid of the teapot, checking to see if the brew has steeped enough. Gauging colour and complexity of scent. “Which is why we need to supplement them with positive associations.”

Abigail gives him another dubious look.

Hannibal merely pours the steaming tisane into a waiting teacup. “No more bad dreams, Abigail.”

“You want me to do drugs?” Ah, the biting teenage sarcasm again. Hannibal is rapidly becoming acquainted with the cutting edge of omegas’ tongues.

“I want you to do *this* drug. With my supervision. Where it’s safe.” Smiling, Hannibal offers Abigail the teacup, Mikasa porcelain on a matching saucer. “Do you trust me?”

A dangerous question. Abigail senses it, her pupils rapidly flicking between the steaming cup offered out to her and Hannibal’s smile - but, after a slow, careful inhale, makes her choice. She reaches out, her sweater’s sleeves long enough the cuffs slide over her delicate wrists, and accepts the drink. Watching Hannibal watch her as she takes her first careful sip, her lipgloss smearing over the silvered rim.

She grimaces but she swallows, and Hannibal smiles.

It doesn’t take long for the psilocybin to take effect, not with the strength of the brew. The half-expectant, half-puzzled crease between Abigail’s brows smoothes out as the drugs take hold of her, the movements of her limbs turning slow and languid as she sways, very lightly, in place on the floor.

Hannibal keeps half an eye on her as he heats oil in a deep frying pan, half an ear on the soft little *hm* Abigail makes as she swirls around the last dregs of the mushroom tea at the bottom of her cup. Peering at the little whirlpool she has made as if to read her future there, fungal tasseomancy.

Abigail releases the teacup all at once with both of her hands - and seems quite perplexed at the *crash* it makes on the kitchen floor, at the splattered liquid and shards of porcelain all around her feet. Alice through the Looking-Glass, astounded by what she has found there. Drifting through the nonsense, in a state temporarily divorced from the realities of cause and effect.

Abigail speaks as though she is still far away. "...Dr. Bloom said this was okay?" Floating away from the mess on the floor like a pale flittering butterfly, her attention apparently caught by the strange wonders of Hannibal's fruit bowl.

"Not at all." Hannibal removes the pan from the heat before coming around the island to begin clear-up, crouching down on the floor. "We often have a difference of opinion."

Abigail continues to be thoroughly intrigued by the fruit bowl, plucking up a persimmon to turn it this way and that under the lights. "More secrets for us."

"Oh, you and I will have many secrets," Hannibal says. Glancing thoughtfully over at his guest in-between picking up shards of porcelain, Abigail taking her persimmon over to the chair in the corner of the kitchen and flopping down onto the seat. She's fascinated with it still. "...Infusing psilocybin into the bloodstream before psychotherapy can elicit a positive, even spiritual, experience for patients."

"I'm not your patient," Abigail says dreamily. An observation rather than a rebuttal.

"No, you're my guest." Setting the teacup shards aside for now, Hannibal approaches his young guest, pleased as she yields instinctively to his presence and sits up straighter in her seat, her throat - figuratively - bared to him in supplication. "Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. I want to give you your power back."

Abigail blinks vaguely. Blinks again. "I- I don't. Feel so good." She's having trouble focusing on Hannibal's face, her attention visibly drifting back and forth between the kitchen and whatever thoughts are passing through her head.

Hannibal crouches down in front of her. "That feeling will pass," he tells Abigail gently, holding her face between his hands and helping her eyes to focus on him. "Allow it to wash over you, through you. Let me be your guide."

Abigail nods though she still seems a little bewildered by the instruction, her gaze still drifting away from Hannibal, over his shoulder and to the food preparations in the kitchen beyond him. And slowly realises something, present in the moment once more. "You're… making breakfast for dinner?"

Correct. Hannibal smiles at Abigail fondly, patting the girl's cheek before rising to his feet once again and heading back to the food. "Not just breakfast."

Abigail beams widely and unreservedly at the affection. The psilocybin is still clearly holding her in its grasp as she gets up from her seat as well, giving a dizzy little giggle as she drops her persimmon on the vacated armchair behind her.

“High Life eggs,” says Hannibal when Abigail finally manages to present herself at the kitchen island again, gesturing to his stovetop. Duck eggs set into the carved-out hollows of elegantly-braided challah buns and sausages cook together in the same oil-drenched pan. “A chef in Spain called Muro claims he invented it in the 19th century.”

As Abigail watches attentively, Hannibal throws a potato up into the air - and catches it, as it falls, on the sharp edge of his knife. *Tadaa.*

Abigail is - indulgently - impressed. Softened by his levity.

“Much like scent, taste is not only biochemical,” Hannibal informs her. “It’s also psychological, evoking memories of places and experiences.”

Occasionally overwriting them, if done correctly.

Abigail looks at the High Life eggs again. To the other pan beside it, full of cubed potatoes tossed in with freshly ground meat, whole unpeeled cloves of garlic, and thyme. Tomatoes are ready to be roasted in the oven. Oranges wait to be juiced on the countertop.

“...Sausage and eggs was the last meal I was having with my parents.”

“I know,” says Hannibal. Smiling at Abigail to encourage her to instinctively smile back at him: an action she will innately associate with being in a happier mood. “It’s also the first real meal you’re having with me.”

Abigail beams at him again and gives a little happy *bounce* on the toes of her feet. Girl and butterfly bobbing away.

Afternoon slinks into evening. Beverly still hasn’t texted Will back - likely because she’s incredibly busy, because whatever’s occupying her about the crime scene at the Brown Memorial Church has made Jack Crawford try to call Will three more times since the last time Will deliberately ignored him.

The irritation about that - Jack’s calls, not Beverly’s delay - niggles at Will like he has ants crawling around under the surface of his skin. Biting, stinging insects descending like it’s a picnic on a hot summer’s day. Will can *see* them, little black spots marching over his flesh, out of the corners of his eyes, and he has to resist slapping at his own arms, stopping himself from scratching great gouges into his flesh to get rid of the infestation.

It helps a little when he pulls on his dressing-gown to cover up all his bare skin. It helps a little more when he takes a moment to freak out in the bathroom, and dunks his hot, aching head into a sinkful of cold water.

Long wet curls drip into Will's eyes afterwards; his hair's getting long. Pretty long. (God, does he have a mullet?) Is there any point in cutting it until he's out of the hospital? Organising a hairdresser would be such a pain.

Will is distracted from both his internal grumblings and squeezing his hair dry by Hannibal's arrival that evening with dinner - and Abigail Hobbs, the girl pretty damn obviously *high as a kite*.

Abigail drifts into the hospital room as though she's in a dream, the black pupils of her eyes blown wide enough to find galaxies in. "Will!"

"Abigail?" Will drops his towel. Grateful, suddenly, that he'd thought to shove all the presents he'd bought Abigail out of sight and out of the way in his suite's - huge - provided closet. Less for him to trip over.

Abigail floats her way over to him before Will can stop her, laughing when she immediately stumbles over Will's towel on the floor. She bumps up against Will's chest when he immediately lunges in to steady her by the forearms, her scent sweet with dazed and happy blackberries and hay.

She smells like summertime, and it brings a lump to Will's throat. He hadn't realised before then just how much he could miss someone he barely knows.

Oblivious, Abigail smiles up into Will's face, innocent and wondrous with it. A thin rim of gold around her irises speaks to her current happiness, the world through her eyes currently coloured with sunshine. "Hannibal and I made dinner. Hannibal's giving me cooking lessons."

"Is he now?" Will digs up a strained smile from somewhere to answer Abigail with as he sets her back properly on her own two feet - before giving Hannibal a terribly pointed look over the unsuspecting girl's head. *Some warning would've been nice.* "I didn't think you'd bring her here."

Hannibal - *obnoxious ass* - absolutely fails to feel any shame whatsoever as he comes over to join them, a bright glint to his gaze as he looks back at Will that could be either mischief or pleasure. (Or both.) "Why wouldn't I? She very much wished to see you, and you her."

Will tilts his chin down sharply - and *meaningfully* - at the wide sloppy spread of Abigail's smile. *This isn't normal.*

Hannibal smiles back at him, inscrutable as a sphinx. Guarded in the armour of his suit again, black over a blood-red shirt. "Everything will be fine, Will."

"You visited me in hospital all the time," says Abigail. Which is *not* something Will knew she knew about, and doesn't know what he feels about her knowing about it now. "It was on

Tattlecrime."

Damn it.

Will scowls at Hannibal. "You've got her reading that crap now as well?"

"Abigail chooses her own reading material," Hannibal says placidly. Before giving Abigail a fondly arch look that makes Abigail grin, a small playful toss of her loose brown hair. (A topic that the two of them must already have discussed?) "Counter to all given advice, it seems."

"Know thy enemy," Abigail quotes as both her explanation and her excuse. All elongated vowels: *knooow thyyy eh-nee-meeeeee.* Fluttered eyelashes at Will, her lids smeared with a shimmery eyeshadow: "Did you really break somebody's legs with a spade?"

Will grimaces. "I did."

"Did they deserve it?"

Will hesitates. His hair continues to drip sad cold droplets down the nape of his neck.

("In the hospital, I wanted to hurt him. He was going to hurt Abigail.")

("I thought about hitting him in the head with the shovel, denting his skull. I knew when I hit him in the legs that he'd fall.")

"He most certainly did," says Hannibal warmly, and the thrill of his repeated approval goes down Will's spine in a gulp of (guilty-bewildered-grateful) heat.

"It said he was trying to kidnap me," Abigail continues, sounding so impersonal about the event that Will has to wonder if she's truly processed that trauma and moved on from it already or if the haze of *whatever* it is she's currently on is helping her disassociate. "So you saved me twice."

"I- yeah," Will says, because Abigail is looking up at him, expectant of a response, and then promptly has an armful of extremely buzzed teenager again, Abigail's arms clasped around his neck in a limpet-heavy hug. *"Uh.*"

Will glances over Abigail's shoulder at Hannibal for help.

Hannibal 100% declines to help - his eyes crinkling at the corners in the way Will knows means that the ass is *definitely* laughing at him - and takes the opportunity to wander over to the ward's dining table, beginning to unpack his gigantic thermal bag.

"Your hair's wet," Abigail says wonderingly, absently tugging at a few of the still-wet strands at Will's nape and sending another awkward shiver of sensation down Will's back that has very little to do with the mild clamminess of Abigail's skin against his own. He's not- he's not *used* to this. He doesn't know where to put his hands. "You'll get sick."

"Sicker." Hannibal. Will glowers at him.

“Sicker,” Abigail amends. Tugs on Will’s hair again and sighs gustily against his throat. “It’s good you’re mostly okay though. Nobody told me you were sick until a few days ago.”

Aside from having other, more pressing, things on his mind, Will hadn’t been so sure Abigail would care to know about his hospitalisation.

Tentatively, Will allows his arms to fold around the omega still clasped to his front, his hands settling a little awkwardly against the middle of her back. Rubbing back and forth over the weave of her coat. “I’m sorry.”

“Can’t help being sick.”

“That’s not-” *what Will is apologising for.*

“Are you hungry?” Abigail releases Will and spins away from him so abruptly Will doesn’t have the time to steady her before she sways dizzily over to Hannibal and the dinner table never mind finish his own sentence. (At least she misses the towel this time.) She beams at Will as Hannibal replaces him by graciously propping her up with a proffered forearm. “We made *breakfast* for dinner.”

“...I could eat,” Will says slowly, joining his two companions at the table.

Hannibal has- Hannibal and Abigail have made a feast again, dishing up *huevos* high life topped with fresh salsa, some kind of fancy garlic meat-and-potato hash, fat homemade sausages and roasted tomatoes onto three separate plates. One large container-bowl is filled with a mixture of chocolate drops, berries and chopped fruits, and Hannibal has brought *two* flasks of beverages for them to drink from: one a deliciously dark hot chocolate made with vanilla, cinnamon, chilli and cayenne powder, and the other chilled, apparently freshly-squeezed, orange juice.

“Once more,” Will observes as he takes in the table groaning with gourmet food, lifting his eyes with a wry smile to Hannibal sitting opposite him, “I’m reminded that your *breakfasts* are fancier than most restaurant’s set menus.”

Occupied with pouring their orange juice, Hannibal huffs a laugh through his nose. “I really must take you to some better restaurants.” With everyone’s coats, jackets and dressing-gowns removed for dinner, his fingers are chilled as he offers Will’s glass of juice to him across the table, but the emotion glittering in the blood-red seas of his eyes is warm. “I believe you might subsist entirely on coffee, spite and off-brand candy if left to your own devices for too long.”

“And fish,” Will adds with a crooked grin. Hannibal’s simplistic summary of Will’s imagined diet isn’t so far off the real thing those days when Will isn’t stuck in the hospital or run off his feet with work. “Can’t forget the fish. I cook a lot of what I catch, and I catch plenty when I can.”

“Good to know the collection of rods and lures in your front room isn’t all for show.”

“All about the aesthetics, me,” Will says, pleased to see Hannibal mirroring his grin with teeth on show. Picking up his fork at last to scoop up a portion of the hash. “Remind me to catch you something when I finally get out of here. It’s mostly crappie out in the waters around where I live right now, but, with a bit of persistence, I could hook you some trout.”

Hannibal toasts him with a glass of juice - “You hook, I’ll cook.” - and then pauses as he looks at Abigail sitting between them, the girl unusually quiet for some time now and smiling wide and dreamily at both of them.

Lost in a daydream, her eyes irises all gold where her pupils haven’t obscured them.

Will sets down his fork and reaches out to touch her arm gently, giving Abigail something to ground herself with. “What is it, Abigail?”

Hannibal’s smile at their companion can only be described as paternal, his hand laid on Abigail's arm on the girl’s other side. “What do you see?”

“...I see family,” Abigail breathes, radiant with it, and Will can smell the salt of the tears suddenly welling up in her eyes.

She’s so happy.

She’s so happy, and Will can’t be sure entirely what she’s looking at, what wires might have been crossed in her head by whatever Hannibal or another medical professional has obviously given her, by this whole situation and them.

Hannibal looks at Will, clearly pleased by Abigail’s pronouncement and her mood spilling the scent of sweet berries and fresh wild woods around them, but Will- Will *wants* so desperately to be happy along with Hannibal, with Abigail, but his delight is a flickering, guttering thing challenged by a great deal of disquietude. Abigail’s sentiments are borne of artifice, however unintentional.

Will’s own eyes prickle with gold or tears or both, empathy and self-pity.

“You should eat your food before it gets cold,” he tells Abigail roughly, and pats her arm once more before withdrawing his hand back to safer territory near his plate. Head hunkered down against the thoughtful look he can feel Hannibal levelling at him across the table. “You went to so much trouble making it, after all.”

They eat, their individual thoughts and feelings chewed alongside the food. Sliced apart and stabbed on the tines of a fork for easier digestion.

Fried breakfast foods do not, perhaps, travel the most efficiently over long distances whilst still retaining their freshest ‘just-made’ flavour and heat, but Hannibal and Abigail’s offerings that evening are delicious all the same. The golden yolk of Will’s fried egg is still round and wobbling before it is burst by a chunk of sausage, the hash filling and flavourful besides.

After the main part of the meal has been consumed, Will finds himself ushered over to the sofa with a refill of hot chocolate. Hannibal tucks a blanket around his shoulders and brings

Will the bowl of chopped fruit and chocolate to snack on and Abigail stumble-flops down onto the seat beside him - all the better to be within snacking range - and starts fiddling with the TV remote.

She seems taken by the way the overhead lights reflect off the different textures of plastic on the buttons - or just perplexed at trying to remember how the remote works, Will isn't sure. (There *are* a lot of mysterious buttons on the damn thing.) Either way, Abigail eventually manages to turn the TV on, flicking erratically through a few channels before she finds and settles on a truly terrible mythological-themed action flick only a few years old with lots of special effects and swordfights, (thankfully) already halfway through its run-time.

Hannibal, perching on another seat, adopts the look of the vaguely martyred the first time he overhears someone on screen butcher their pronunciation of an ancient Greek name, and only succeeds in looking increasingly wounded the more he realises just *how* badly the movie mangles Greek mythology in general. The fact that Will and Abigail are both raptly watching the screen regardless seems to be another source of horror to him - and a source of great entertainment to Will, who *barely* manages to hide his smirk at Hannibal's melodramatic reaction behind the rim of his mug.

Will isn't sure what it is about the movie that's caught Abigail's attention, but he, personally, is getting quite into watching it *because* of how bad it is. And because even when he drains the last of his hot chocolate he's got chunks of mango, peaches, strawberries and chocolate drops to snack on with abandon whilst he checks out the very nice bare muscled legs of the actor playing the leader of the king's guard, the hot character in question riding with the reluctant protagonist on his adventures.

The actor is vaguely familiar to Will from *somewhere*, but the *where* eludes Will due to the greater distraction of the man, this time around, wearing a *very* short tunic and armour as he does all his swordfighting and wrestling giant monster scorpions on screen. Those legs go on for *days*. (And the actor's chest, and hair, and little aggressive toothy snarl aren't too bad either.)

Abigail nestles herself comfortably up against Will's side before Will realises that the younger omega intends to *stay* there. He'd thought Abigail was just reaching for some of the fruit/chocolate snacks on his lap - but no, her arms are still loosely folded across her own chest, and her head is falling against his shoulder with the soft perfume of her happy scent and hospital-issued Head & Shoulders shampoo. (At least *his* hair is dry now.)

Will freezes like a startled rabbit.

A few more dramatic pronouncements are made on-screen.

Abigail, a little too obviously to be polite and still entirely unselfconscious about it, turns her face into Will's upper arm and sniffs him curiously. "...You smell different. Like a Christmas market. Is it because you're sick?"

If it's possible, Will manages to tense up further. He's coming up to the point in his pregnancy where his natural scent will definitely and noticeably change, signalling he's with child.

He meets Hannibal's eyes over Abigail's head once more. Again, Hannibal's expression is a placid one (probably pleased for a distraction from the movie): *This is your decision.*

So Will picks the safest option available to him.

"...Probably," he not-quite-lies to Abigail, slowly thawing out his limbs so he can pick up the edges of his blanket and tuck it around the other omega as well. Bringing her into his own warmth, choosing to let that unsettled thing inside of him - mostly - settle at last, content to have his charge safe and close.

Seeing nothing strange about his answer, Abigail's attention drifts back to the movie, seduced by all the flashy lights and loud noises. Taking Will's drape of the blanket over her splayed limbs as par for the course.

After about another 20 minutes of poorly strung-together plot, she falls asleep with her face still squished up against Will's arm.

Will's interest in the movie after that dies around the same time as the character he'd been ogling, and he turns his unimpressed stare back on the attentive Hannibal once more. Trying to keep his voice low, mindful of the young woman currently using him as her pillow: "...What the hell did you *give* her?"

Hannibal hums quietly, considering. Finally deciding upon, "I believe we once touched upon the many varied uses of our fungal ancestors?"

"Our f- you gave her *shrooms?!"*

"Brewed in a tea, and administered with her informed consent." Hannibal seems entirely unaffected by Will's scandalised hiss, folding one leg elegantly over the other and reclining comfortably back into his seat for the first time since they'd sat down in front of the TV. Clearly preferring conversation to Abigail's choice in cinematic media. "Psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy is rapidly becoming considered a viable option for the treatment of major depression, PTSD, and other psychiatric disorders, Will. Studies suggest that psilocybin, alongside some other psychedelic drugs, enhances neuroplasticity in animal - including human - brains. Boosting the brain's ability to forge new neuronal connections in its receptive state."

"She's barely *here,* Hannibal," Will says accusingly. "Tripping off to see the wizard in full technicolour."

"I believe our Dorothy already knows there's no place like home." Hannibal shrugs off the angry little - aborted - snarl Will gives him, *shameless.* "Wherever Abigail has gone to today, Will, there has always been a part of us with her. And I have never left her physically alone."

Will's lips thin, shifting the snack bowl off his lap with some disgust. "It takes some arrogance to declare yourself the psychopomp of another person's hell."

"I have often found that arrogance and humility go hand-in-hand in psychiatry," Hannibal says gently. Not unkindly. "I respect and understand your dislike for many in my profession,

Will - no doubt you've suffered over the years as the mediocre tried and failed to understand your brilliant singularity -, but many others beyond yourself find it helpful to have a guiding hand lead them through the mists they've mired themselves in."

"'*Mists,* '" Will says flatly. "You mean *mushrooms*."

Hannibal meets his stare, unmoved. "For therapeutic purposes, the biological effects of psilocybin work best in concert with human guidance. Traumatic memories can be revisited, reexamined and re-compartmentalised in a safe and comfortable environment without experiencing the pain usually attached to them."

"Pressing positive associations into the clay whilst it's soft enough to be moulded, overwriting the trauma attached to the older shape." Will's annoyance is fading - and he's *annoyed* that he's getting less annoyed. There's a principle that's been trodden all over here, he can *feel* it, but the exact point irritating him eludes articulation in the face of Hannibal's logical and emotional eloquence.

He frowns down at Abigail's sleeping head nestled up against him, the soft scatter of her hair over his arm. Remembering that same hair spread out in a corona on the Hobbs' kitchen floor, blood pooling around it and sticking to the dark strands.

The domestic smells of breakfast hanging in the air alongside the scent of fear, panic, iron and cordite.

Will sighs. "...They were having sausage and eggs that morning in the Hobbs' house, weren't they?"

No need to specify *which* morning.

Hannibal gives a single confirming nod. "It is important that Abigail moves on from the horrors of that moment, that meal, that kitchen, lest she become trapped in them."

In her father's house, in her father's shadow, under her father's knife.

"It's a hard life if you're stuck with hang-ups about breakfast," Will murmurs.

"The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live."

Will sighs again and shifts slightly so that he can free up some use of the arm that's currently trapped between him and Abigail. Curling it tentatively around the girl's shoulders instead, rubbing against the soft fabric of her sweater between her shoulder blades. Forgiveness of sorts. "She seemed to be having a happy trip."

"I did my best to make it a positive experience for her," says Hannibal. "Seeing you greatly helped with that."

"I'm surprised Alana didn't insist on supervising." The barest - telling - flicker of an expression passes across Hannibal's face, there and gone again. Will's eyes narrow shrewdly, reading the non-answer for exactly what it is. "Alana doesn't know."

Hannibal uncrosses his legs to stretch them, then crosses them again the other way around. “I believe Alana was asked to consult on a crime scene this morning,” he says primly.

Alana doesn’t know, and Hannibal is hoping Alana *won’t find out.*

Will groans, letting his head fall back to thump against the sofa cushion behind him. “How do you think you’re going to- how long ago did she drink the tea?”

The effects of shrooms can last for up to *six hours*: if Alana encounters Abigail before then, there’ll be no hiding the fact that the teenager has been drugged with something.

Hannibal avoids the question. “Should it become necessary, I will handle Alana, Will.” Damn right he will.

“You’ve made me your accomplice,” Will complains. He’s quite capable of getting himself on Alana Bloom’s bad/disappointed side *without* Hannibal’s help in the matter, thanks very much.

Hannibal has the gall to smile at him, his eyes twinkling with the reflected light from the TV screen as thousands of crowd actors scream and run around in panic from yet another monster. As though this is all *terribly* amusing. “Side by side on the Naughty List.” Will bares his fangs at him, vexed. *Again.* “I will handle Alana.”

“Good, because I’m washing my hands of you. If she asks me, I knew nothing about this.”

“Of course,” Hannibal agrees. “Who could suspect those big blue eyes of yours of anything?” Oh, he’s decided to bring out the *flattery* now.

“This from the man with the silver tongue,” says Will. Letting his head loll to the side so he can inquire laconically, “How *do* they keep letting you get away with murder?”

Hannibal actually laughs aloud at that, a wonderful rumble of sound that always pulls an answering smile - however reluctantly - from the middle of Will’s own chest. “Perhaps I am just *that* charming,” he suggests playfully, and Will snorts into the sofa. “Uncharitable. Where’s your Christmas spirit, Will?”

“At home. With all the *other* bottles of booze I can’t currently drink.”

Hannibal makes a soft, understanding sort of noise, and Will takes the opportunity to reach over and pop another chunk of peach into his mouth. Chewing away the urge to pout.

“Gonna have a real strange Christmas this year. Couldn’t have foreseen this-” Will gestures hopelessly to the room around them both, to Abigail, to his own abdomen, with sticky fingertips - “*any* of this, this time last year.”

“No. But strange and unexpected do not always mean bad.” Hannibal’s head tilts to one side, curious, as Will broods and sucks his own fingers clean. “What do your Christmases look like, Will?”

Uneventful. “Quiet, for the most part. Just me and the dogs. I put up a tree, and splash out on some gifts for myself and the pack. Sometimes have a drink with the neighbour.”

“No big dinner?”

Will snorts again, a soft *heh.* “It’s a little ridiculous to cook a turkey for one. Sure, the dogs would be glad to help, but.” Pinned in place by Abigail's weight, Will can’t really shrug. His free hand lifts and falls to the leather of the sofa cushion instead with a gentle *slap:* an eloquent motion. “My grandma used to do turkey, when I was small. We ate the leftovers for weeks after the holidays were done. After she died… You already know I grew up poor. My dad and I… we couldn’t always afford fancy food or presents. Always tried to have *something* a little special on Christmas Day though.”

Freshly-caught fish cooked the time-consuming *fancy* way that was usually too much effort. A little powdered cinnamon in a cup of instant hot chocolate. That time Will got the highest score in a quiz at school at the end of term and won himself a whole box of pecan candy to eat with his daddy on Christmas Day, listening to carols on the beat-up radio.

Simpler times, even with the constant struggle for money, the constant upping of sticks and moving on to pastures new.

A wistful little smile tugs at the corners of Will’s lips: a gift from his yesteryears. “There’s this old tradition down in Louisiana: Christmas bonfires all along the levees on Great River Road, between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Lighting the way for Papa Noël along the Mississippi on Christmas Eve, so he can’t forget all the good boys and girls down in the bayou.

They’re 20 feet-high, some of them. Just regular stacks, mostly, but some of them get built to look like old plantation houses or paddlewheel boats. Families make ‘em. Friend groups, co-workers. There’s cook-outs and parties between the fires. Music.”

Down by the levees had been about as far away from dreams of a white Christmas you could get. It’s been a while since Will was down in Louisiana, especially for the winter holidays, but he can still remember the heat of the flames scorching his cheeks, the way his eyeballs had felt like they were drying out if he stared too long at one of the fires, distracted by the patterns in the flames. Sweat dripping down his back from the sultry air, sticking his shirt to his spine.

“My dad used to take me to see them if we were nearby. Nobody usually minded sharing some of their food with a hungry kid on Christmas Eve if there was a lot goin’ round, so it was a good way to score a meal for the night.”

“It sounds like a happy memory,” says Hannibal, his voice soft enough it sounds sincere.

“Yeah.” Will coughs a little, clearing his throat of old memories and sentiments. Throwing the weight of the conversation back to his - awake - companion instead. “What about you, Hannibal? What do your Christmases look like?”

A lull in noise coming from the TV: the movie is coming to an end. The light softens against Hannibal's cheekbones, amber tones making richer shadows against the angles of his face and warming the red of his shirt beneath the deep darkness of his waistcoat and trousers. A slice of something living beneath.

It's a good look on him.

"It may surprise you," Hannibal says mildly, "but they aren't so terribly different from yours. I decorate my home and there are all the performances and social gatherings before the big day, of course, but I tend to spend Christmas itself alone. I take my time preparing an extravagant meal for the evening, listening to music and indulging in my other hobbies."

Huh. Will isn't sure what he'd been expecting, but that answer hadn't been it. "And here I thought you'd spend the day rejecting all those proposals inspired by your pomegranate sorbet."

"Pomegranate and *clementine,*" Hannibal corrects - realising a beat afterwards that Will is teasing him again. Will grins lopsidedly at him, and Hannibal shakes his head. "Wicked thing." Fond, still.

But now Will is curious. He pries, tentatively, "…You said you were orphaned young, but did you- you had some Christmases with your family before then, right?"

A delicate pause, and Will panics for a moment. This conversation was not an established *quid pro quo.* He's crossed a boundary here, surely -

"I did," Hannibal says, and Will doesn't breathe again until he sees the brief flutter-blink of the other man's microfine eyelashes, "with my parents. A smaller handful with them and my sister."

The gathering tension bleeds out of Will's shoulders and he smiles at Hannibal, awkwardly, trying to convey his appreciation for Hannibal humouring him. For sharing something so personal.

He *doesn't* expect Hannibal to keep talking, but, once more, Hannibal defies his expectations.

Reminiscing, "My mother was Italian. She brought many of her traditions with her to her new home in Lithuania with my father, and we celebrated them together as a family. I used to eat so much panettone and turrón that Cook threatened to put me in the oven instead of our Christmas joint."

Will has to quietly chuckle at that, trying to imagine a young Hannibal. Smaller and sticky-fingered from treats, perhaps a bit knobby-kneed and coltish with those long legs of his to grow into, but still with those bright, inquisitive eyes of his adult self, those beautiful cheekbones and aquiline nose. Utterly precocious. "The hedonism started young."

Hannibal doesn't deny it. "In more ways than one. Mother had an elaborate antique *presepio* - a nativity scene - that we all adored with dozens of little statuettes. A tableau of a rural Italian village in the 18th century, gathered around the Christ-child. All the usual figures you

would expect - the Holy Family, angels, the shepherds and their flock, the Magi -, but buildings, animals, and villagers as well.

The other decorations in our home, of course, all had to be put up in early December, but every night from then until Christmas we would gather in the parlour and add a few more statuettes to the *presepio*. My favourite was a horse with his head stuck in a barrel of apples; it reminded me of our working horse, Cesar. He would gorge himself on every apple within his reach if you didn't mind him. Including ones not meant for him in your pockets."

Will almost wants to ask what happened to the set, but Hannibal shakes his head again slowly to himself, the motion of someone tenderly tucking their memories back into storage, so Will does not. Tactfully keeping quiet until Hannibal has gotten his thoughts in order once more and addresses him first.

"It's been some time since I last thought about these things. Thank you, Will." Thoughtful.

"...All part of the service," Will offers a bit lamely. Unable to meet the tenderness he can see in Hannibal's eyes and so occupying himself with rubbing his hand comfortingly down the slope of Abigail's upper back.

She's still sleeping soundly, thankfully. Her face all smushed up against his shoulder/chest like a drunk.

No-one is paying any attention to the TV any more so Hannibal reaches out for the remote and switches it off.

The silence that follows is loud and ringing, only an emphasis to the sound of Will's own breathing in his ears, the graceful unfolding of Hannibal's legs in a quiet rub of fabric.

Hannibal stands - smoothly, suddenly - and Will almost chokes on an inhaled breath when the beta is abruptly before him, leaning over him, his hand on Will's cheek to lift Will's gaze upwards to his own.

"Spend Christmas with me."

Will blinks at him rapidly, this looming shadow. All he can breathe at that moment is silver spice and salt, a sudden rush of it all to the head: Hannibal's cologne, a trace of soap, and the faint savoury tang beneath of the ingredients Hannibal must have handled in the preparation of their dinner. "Sorry?"

"Spend Christmas with me this year, Will," Hannibal says again, his firm tone straddling the fine line between *request* and *order*. "At my home. I'm sure we could check you out for a few days with your medications, and I have the skills and equipment to administer them for you."

Get out of the hospital?

"…That -" Will licks his suddenly dry lips, instinctively trying to duck his head again - and ending up nuzzling into the warm curve of Hannibal's palm instead - "sounds suspiciously

like something that would be against my team's medical advice."

"You would be under my constant supervision," Hannibal assures him. Casting himself as guide and psychopomp again. "And, of course, should you need it, I could always bring you straight back here. We already know what it is that afflicts you."

Well. That's a good point.

"That sounds…" Will hesitates - something in him skittish but yearning -, and yet ultimately takes the plunge. "That sounds really good actually." He shivers, rewarded with the gentle caress of Hannibal's thumb under his eye and long, strong fingers sifting back into his hair. "But wouldn't it interfere with your peaceful day? I mean, uh- I'm a bit high-maintenance at the moment." To say the least.

Hannibal smiles at him again, and Will can feel his cheeks warm. Watching the crinkling of crow's feet at the corners of Hannibal's eyes, the way the focus of Hannibal's pupils keeps drifting between Will's eyes and his mouth. "Aren't we all, each in our own way? You have your own quality of peacefulness that you bring with you, Will, and it seems to match quite well with my own."

Will's heart gives a queer little stutter-*thump* in his chest. He can't recall- he's been described as *quiet,* sure, plenty of times over the years. Introverted. Dreamy. Withdrawn. *Weird,* most frequently. Peaceful? Never.

Peacefulness: the serenity that comes with being with someone that you like, simply existing in harmony together, and no words needing to be said. Dinners and glances shared, minds and metaphors matched and understood. Hands held and pages tenderly read.

The last person Will can remember snatching such moments with was his father, and that was- *Christ,* that was a long time ago now.

"It would be my honour to host you for Christmas," Hannibal tells him gently, and all Will can do for that moment is stare back at him with a stupid little *oh* on his lips that Hannibal *keeps* looking at. "And my sincerest pleasure. I would invite Abigail to join us as well, but I'm afraid Alana might frown on such intimacies at this point."

Hosting someone for Christmas probably counts as showing too *personal* an interest in their welfare.

"Yeah," Will breathes, feeling too hot all of a sudden. And then realises that he's not being very clear about what he's agreeing to - "I- yeah, I'll come. If you're *sure."*

"I am," says Hannibal, and Will's heart turns over in his chest once more.

Please don't be inviting me just because I'm sick. Will's smile wobbles, unsure, his mouth still caught by the base of Hannibal's thumb. (*The Mount of Venus,* his knowledge of palmistry unhelpfully reminds him.) "Then yes. Yes, okay. Thank you."

Hannibal's hand lingers before he pulls it away, his fingertips brushing over the curve of Will's reddened - and reddening - ear. *Flatteringly* pleased with himself. And Will. (Damn it.) "It's a date."

Alana Bloom is a perfect storm of righteousness against the neutral backdrop of Noble Hills: a thing of tousled dark hair, icy eyes, and sharp with the ozone of the world outside. The odour of death lingers underneath - in her clothes, clinging like a lover to her skin - from the crime scene she must have been busy at and with all day, an omen of things to come. The colour of her furious, wind-chafed cheeks is only a few shades brighter than the rich burgundy of her winter coat and it is lovely on her, truly.

Regardless, the sight is something that Hannibal would have preferred to avoid; the situation he has brought them both to is not unexpected, of course, but still inconvenient.

Having prepared for a scenario where Alana might realise Abigail is missing from Port Haven and hunt down her errant patient at the hospital, the nurse on duty at the desk on Will's floor - as requested - lets Hannibal know when Alana sweeps into the reception area downstairs. Giving Hannibal enough time to head Alana off in the hallway outside Will's suite without the currently dozing Will or Abigail yet aware of her presence, escorting the other beta into an empty room away from the prying eyes and ears of curious hospital staff.

Alana consents to be led elsewhere but she is clearly struggling, still, to find the words she can use to yell at Hannibal whilst still maintaining their friendship. Pacing the floor again, trying to get around the block in her throat.

"As someone who makes such a big deal about common courtesy, I'm a little taken aback - slash a *lot* taken aback - that you would take my patient -" a heel-turn right in front of Hannibal, Alana glaring rather impressively up into his face - "*my* patient, out of the hospital without my permission."

Not quite yelling, but firm. Still undeniably furious. Remarkably composed.

"You did," Hannibal tells Alana mildly, "agree to cooking lessons for Abigail. Every other weekend."

"*'Perhaps',* you said! Perhaps! And at no point did you clarify that you wished to begin them *this* weekend! Not to mention," and here Alana gathers steam once more, making a wide-swinging *jab* with one arm to encompass the hospital scenery around them both, "you brought her *here?* Hannibal, we agreed that bringing her to see Will wasn't a good idea!"

Hannibal presses his lips together, displeased by Alana's assumption. *That*, he had definitely not agreed to.

She reads the mutiny in his silence and makes a little *ah* in her temper, aggrieved. “Will is currently in *no* state to be a source of stability to Abigail in her recovery, and seeing yet *another* person who has taken an almost parental role in her life - someone she already perceives as a saviour - in mental, physical and emotional distress is likely to be deeply traumatising for her!”

“They both wished to see one another.”

Alana’s shoulders go back, a sharp exhale of breath going out through her nose. “You and I *both* know that what we wish for isn’t always the thing that’s best for us.” She waits, her anger simmering, until Hannibal gives her a chastised nod, his gaze averted from her blaze of blue. “Now, I’m not a professional scold. But *don’t* put me in this position ever again.” Stalking away.

Hannibal sighs. “I’m sorry.”

The apology is not accepted. “Rude! Hannibal, *shockingly* rude!”

Few people hold importance enough in Hannibal’s life that he would consider taking the brunt of their temper in such a way. Alana Bloom is indeed lucky that Hannibal holds her in such affectionate esteem - and that her opinion, of course, must also matter to him in some way.

At the very least, Alana’s opinion affects how society perceives Hannibal, and so must be carefully cultivated.

“You have every right to be upset with me,” Hannibal says with a great deal of rapidly summoned-up contrition. *He* would be furious if someone had absconded with his patient in the same way he had done with Alana’s. “I overstepped my bounds.”

Alana only glowers at him some more, her mouth a thin pink line. “She’s with Will now?”

“I left them both sleeping. Dinner and TV tired them both out.” Hannibal places a careful hand on Alana’s shoulder when the woman turns for the door, slowing her down. “Alana? You were right.”

“Often am,” Alana bites out. Hannibal drops his hand from her arm. “Have to be more specific.”

“She wasn’t ready to leave the hospital. She experienced a bit of anxiety so I gave her a sedative.”

“Sedative?” Alana stiffens in alarm. “What did you give her?”

Hannibal assembles a self-deprecating smile for his companion’s benefit: *mea culpa.* “I only gave her half a valium, but she may be a little hazy.”

“Hannibal,” Alana says, still thoroughly put-out - but does moderate the angry clacking of her heels on the floor as she leaves the spare room Hannibal had secluded them both in.

Hannibal had left both Will and Abigail sleeping, still tucked up together under one blanket on the couch with the room's lights turned down low. The *click* of the ward's door is enough to awaken Will, one firefly eye slitting open from its rest and shining eerily with the reflected light from the hospital hallway. Vigilant.

"...Alana," Will says hoarsely, rousing a little further at the sound of the woman's - exasperated - heavy exhale when she takes note of Will and Abigail's embrace. He sits up a little, stretching his back as much as his position will allow. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," says Alana, failing to inject any real happiness into her greeting. She's going to be *delightful* when she discovers all of Abigail's bags of shopping.

Hannibal reaches for the dial to turn the room's lights up a little, from deep dusk into a softer evening glow.

Will squints against the change as his eyes adjust and lose some of their gold to a less defensive blue - and, in his arms, Abigail stirs at last. Yawning and blinking somewhat dazedly up at Will before her gaze drifts outwards again. Smiling at Hannibal.

And, still tellingly dreamy, at Alana. "Hi, Doctor Bloom."

Alana exhales again - sharp, through her nose. Smiling back rigidly at her patient, her scent bittering with pulped up greenery at odds with the rest of the room. "Abigail. Hello."

Chapter End Notes

Fondue: (melted) a Swiss melted cheese dish served in a communal pot (usually a caquelon/fondue pot), kept warm over a heat source such as a portable stove, candle or heat lamp, and traditionally eaten by dipping chunks of bread into the cheese using long-stemmed forks or skewers. A blend of cheeses is melted down for the dish (with the types of cheese used varying from region to region) and mixed with varying amounts of beer/wine and/or eggs depending on personal preferences, and occasionally grated truffles, cream, and/or other seasonings.
Since the latter half of the 20th century, the term *fondue* has come to be applied to other dishes wherein food is dipped into a communal pot (or fountain) of heated liquid such as chocolate fondue (*fondue au chocolat*), in which pieces of fruit, candy or pastry are dipped into a melted chocolate mixture, and *fondue bourguignonne*, in which pieces of meat are cooked in hot oil or broth.

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live. - Joy Harjo, *Perhaps the World Ends Here*

I initially thought I'd went a little overboard in what I described Hannibal and Abigail making for their 'breakfast' but, looking back at what's on the table in *Oeuf*, I think I've actually *toned down* the extravagance. The meal in the show features orange juice, water, the plates of eggs and sausages, potato hash, fresh tomatoes, pancakes, peeled

mangoes, cut figs, dried apricots, dried peaches or persimmons, grapes, cranberries, blueberries, strawberries and so many blackberries Hannibal probably emptied a whole farmer's stall for them. There's more stuff there too, but I couldn't make it out.

Points for whoever recognises the movie Abigail picked out.

éclair

Chapter Summary

> Jack Crawford has his feathers ruffled, and ruffles a few feathers in return. Hannibal is witnessed having an emotion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack has the decency to wait until at least midmorning the next day before showing up unannounced in the doorway of Will's room at Noble Hills (though a large part of that may be due to the travel time between Quantico and Baltimore). Beverly follows on his heels like a judgemental shadow, pretty obviously unhappy at Jack and radiating that displeasure in drifting waves of annoyed alpha pheromones and burnt vanilla.

Jack forces his joviality even harder to ignore it, stepping into Will's space after a cursory tap of his knuckles to the door. His smile is wide and close-lipped beneath the brim of his hat, teeth carefully tucked away. "Will! Good to see you again."

"Jack," Will says a great deal more neutrally in response to the intrusion, keeping half an eye on the more irritable Beverly as he sets aside the book he had been listlessly picking his way through on the sofa.

Unlike Jack, Beverly has the tips of her fangs showing when she smiles - though the angry cast to her expression shifts into something more apologetic when she looks at Will. Her gaze flicking back and forth between him and Jack: *this had nothing to do with me.*

Good to know.

Jack remains undaunted by the distinct lack of effusiveness to Will's greeting, approaching the sofa and Will much like a vulture in the desert must inspect their next meal to ensure it really is dead. Hoping not to spook the carrion with a premature peck. "Dr. Lecter mentioned you were in hospital and suggested that you might like a little company now and then. Stop you climbing the walls in boredom."

"Did he now." Will has to blink rapidly to try and send the desert mirage away, the shadow of descending wings turning into Jack's briefcase being laid on the coffee table, the bowl of Jack's removed hat.

The walls are melting again, slithering across the landscape like sand dunes driven to wander by the wind. Eroding all the lines of Will's established cartography, casting him adrift once more.

“Brought you a little something for your convalescence.” Jack thrusts a flat, red card box tied with a jaunty gold ribbon at Will until Will - after a misjudged attempt or two - reaches up to take it from him.

Will offers a soft *thanks* when he sees through the clear lid to the treats inside: some expensive-looking iced gingerbread cookies shaped like snowflakes.

If the mountain won’t come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain - but at least Mohammed appears to be feeling kind (or guilty) enough to bring snacks.

“From the rest of the team.” Beverly places an envelope directly in Will's hands before she strips off her red leather jacket and flops down onto a nearby seat - a *get well soon* card, as it turns out, signed by herself, Price, Zeller and a few other names Will recognises from the labs. “Jimmy wanted to send you a balloon bouquet as well, but I nixed the idea. Mostly because all the normal balloons are out of stock ‘cause everyone’s bought them for all their Christmas and New Years parties, so all that was left were inflatable unicorns and bouquets of knotty balloon dicks.”

“Opposite ends of a very particular spectrum,” Will drolly observes, his lips ticking upwards into his first smile of the day when Beverly flaps a hand at him.

“You can probably expect some sort of present from him at *some* point, but.” She shrugs. There’s only so much one woman can do.

Will stands the card on the coffee table beside Jack’s briefcase and opens up the cookies, offering the box to his- his *guests*. “The truth will out.”

Jack declines but Beverly immediately takes him up on the cookies, working off some of her ire on the crunch-*snap* of gingerbread between her teeth. (The winged edges of her eyeliner appear to be particularly, flawlessly, savage today; clearly, Beverly has got some feelings to work through. Or she’s got a special reason to put on her war paint.) “The truth in this case was more palatable than the rumour going ‘round the Academy saying you’d been whisked away by your jealous alpha betrothéd and were being kept tied down in his den until you agreed to quit doing such dangerous work for the FBI.” Will chokes on air. “A few people *also* suggested that you might be dead in a ditch somewhere after mouthing off to the wrong alpha.”

“*Those* were the best theories from my students and colleagues?” Will asks, as equally fascinated as he is annoyed. “I’d been kidnapped or murdered?”

“Or kidnapped *and* murdered.”

“I’m telling Dr. Bloom to fail all of my students this cycle,” Will says with a scowl, and Beverly steals another one of his snowflake cookies to point at him emphatically.

“And *that* sort of sunny declaration is exactly why people thought you’d talked yourself into being murdered.”

“I’d appreciate not having to handle that paperwork,” says Jack - firmly enough he might as well have just told Will and Beverly to shut their traps.

Will and Beverly shut their traps. (Beverly takes another disgruntled crunch of her cookie.)

Jack heaves out a sigh, something so beleaguered about it all that he reminds Will uncomfortably of his own father doing the *disappointed* thing for a moment or two. Grudgingly concerned. “How are you, Will? You look like hell, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“I feel like hell,” says Will, blunt honesty burning like the taste of Jack’s pepper and patchouli scent on the tip of his tongue. He puts down the cookies, rubbing at the clamminess of his throat with the flat of one hand. “Actually, I feel fluid. Like I’m... spilling.” Lifting his eyes to Jack's frown, “I have encephalitis, Jack. Of the autoimmune variety.”

“Encephalitis,” says Jack. Requesting clarification.

“Inflammation of the brain,” Will explains shortly, watching understanding pile up behind Jack’s eyes like pennies in a fountain full of futile wishes. *Yeah, I have a* damn *good excuse for taking time off work.* “My immune system has decided that my brain is an infection and is attacking it, all guns blazing. Kinda takes it out of a guy.”

“As does the immunotherapy,” Beverly interjects rather pointedly at her boss, rubbing away the crumbs at the corner of her mouth with one thumb. “Shit’s *mean,* Jack.” To say the least.

A long, weighted pause. And then -

Jack sighs as he sits on the couch beside Will - a long, tired thing, like a tree half-uprooted by a wild windy storm succumbing to the inevitable pull of gravity at last. Something worn and tired around the eyes, around the mouth. “I’m sorry to hear it,” he tells Will gruffly, and Will tries not to hunch up awkwardly at the rough sincerity in Jack’s voice. “They know what caused it?”

Will shakes his head. Once. “Would be easier if they did.”

Jack struggles with the honesty of that, trying to find some way to negotiate with words his way around the non-negotiable. The awkward grey realm of human sympathy, social niceties between friendly colleagues, and this personal something - *disease* - that the impersonal law cannot fix. “The treatment coming along though?”

“It’s -” how to explain? Will licks over his dry lips, drawing the lower lip back between his teeth as he thinks - “complicated. Going slowly. There are side-effects.” Beverly gives him a dire look, implicitly threatening that Will is going to get it in the neck from her if he doesn’t further elaborate on those symptoms to Jack and how severe they can be. “Fever and associated problems. Moodswings.” Will pauses there, hoping to be done - and frowns back at Beverly mutinously when she continues to look unimpressed at him. “...Vision, balance and coordination’s a bit fucked,” he admits at last. Grudgingly.

“Just got to keep at it,” Jack says bracingly, injecting both his voice and scent with forced false cheer. It tastes like bitter flower petals against the roof of Will’s mouth, and Will rubs the flat of his tongue back and forth against the acridity on his hard palate for a moment or two. Summoning up the - politic - words to say from behind the vast boulder of his current headache, the throbbing pain that feels like the one fixed point of his universe.

“Keeping on keeping at it.” What else can Will do?

A pause then, again, and Will wonders whether he should be doing the little awkward dance of social niceties and asking his two companions if they’d like a drink - water, tea, coffee, juice - and if they could call one of the nurses in for him if they do because he’s actually feeling a little dizzy at the moment, when Jack - with *greatly* exaggerated nonchalance - reaches for his briefcase on the coffee table. Clicks it open, and fishes out what is very obviously an FBI case file. (Will is beginning to loathe that shade of manilla.)

Ah, the point of the visit.

“Wondered if you’d take a little look at something for me,” says Jack, still painfully casual about the whole manoeuvre - and totally ignoring Beverly’s peeved little hiss between her fangs from over in her seat. She disapproves.

Will disapproves, flicking the point of his tongue hard against the back of his own incisors rather than blurting out an immediate - whining - *Jack,* really? *Fuck off.* “Pretty sure even God took a day off at the weekend, Jack.”

A smile - however grim - from the head of the BAU. “Afraid we don’t all have the luxury of the divine. God might work hard, but our local psychopaths work harder.”

Will doesn’t reach out for the file. “This about the crime scene at the church?” He catches the shift in Jack’s expression and explains: “I saw a bit about it on the news.”

“Didn’t think to give us a call?”

Aside from a brief playful poke at Beverly? *Hell no.*

“It might surprise you to learn that what Baltimore’s local criminal population gets up to in its spare time is not one of my top priorities at the moment, no,” says Will, and doesn’t bother to make any attempt to sound sorry about it.

Jack frowns forbiddingly, the air around him growing heavy with the scent of *displeased alpha* - but his gaze slides past Will before he says anything and must encounter Beverly’s, reminded by some unspoken communication and the burnt vanilla scent of *Beverly’s* own displeasure to look around himself again. Take note of their location and remember the situation in which he’s asking a favour from Will in, *damn* the FBI and its protocols for harassing staff on leave (medical or otherwise).

And ‘charitably’ dismiss Will’s blithe reply to him as a mere moodswing.

“That’s fair,” Jack acknowledges. As though it physically pains him to do so. And offers the file out to Will regardless. “Will you look? Brown Hill Memorial Church -”

“Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church,” says Beverly. An amendment.

“*Whatever* the name is - it’s only 10 minutes away from Patterson Park by car.”

Will frowns at the implication. “...You think it’s the Ripper.”

A noncommittal *hm.* “Think it’s the same guy who left us the scene in the park, anyway, whatever we’re calling him.”

“Jack-”

Jack raises his hand in a silencing motion before Will manages to get the rest of his protest out. “Just… take a look at the file. Tell me what *you* think.”

A very telling pause. Though she doesn’t dare to vocalise it more audibly to her boss, Beverly makes another aggrieved rumble of noise at the back of her throat.

Jack sighs, and belatedly remembers his manners. “...Please.”

“...It’ll take a while,” Will warns him, even as his own shoulders slump.

“Long as you need,” Jack assures him, ever the magnanimous one when he’s getting his own way.

Rather than relying on his own shoddy hand-eye coordination to do the job, Will holds out his hand for Jack to slap the file into, opening the folder and fanning its contents out across his lap. Early lab data. Reports. Photographs.

With the headache and with the issues with his vision, Will finds it difficult to concentrate on the blocky printed words in front of him and easier to look at the pictures - until he looks a little too long at the pictures, and then finds it difficult to focus on *their* contents as well.

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church is a 19th century Gothic style church built of Baltimore County limestone and located in the Bolton Hill neighbourhood of Baltimore, Maryland. With a long list of notable persons attached to its history, soaring vaulted ceilings and a series of exquisite stained glass windows designed by *the* Louis Comfort Tiffany (Christ, even *Will* has heard of Tiffany), the church is considered one of the most significant cultural buildings in Baltimore: an artistic and architectural treasure.

Inside, the walls are cream and the ceiling is blue: someone’s childish dream of heaven. Gilding in gold for the sunbeams, warm tones of polish for the woods. The dark greenery of Advent wreaths to tastefully bedeck the scene between a few other religious nods to the season.

Inside, in front of the largest window in the north transept, atop the painted labyrinth on the floor that would usually lead the devotional penitent tracing its path to the cross at its centre, an artist has removed the cross and crafted a vision of hell instead in the centre of rings of

burning candles. All of it bathed in the soft light, shaded blue, coming in through the window above: the promise of paradise even in the lowest circle.

A puzzle within a puzzle, the tableau is the half-assembled jigsaw of a black man, likely somewhere in his mid-to-late forties, with pieces of him evidently missing. The corpse has been dismembered into many separate parts and yet still arranged, with a deft hand, a few metal stakes, and what must be some industrial-strength chicken wire, as if it were whole, posed as though it were mid-leap over a field of flickering candles that have obviously been gathered from all over the church: tiny votive candles, thin candles taken from candlesticks lining the walls, and tall stout stocky things whose flames lick at the soles of the corpse's feet.

The victim's driver's licence is helpfully propped up at the front of the display, name and identifying photograph on show: *Jack Landry*. Born in '66. According to a brief preliminary investigation, the owner of a local landscape gardening firm. *Not* a Presbyterian, incidentally.

A prickle of the killer's coolly smug self-satisfaction sits behind Will's eyes as he takes in the body, the candles, the whole scene: *feeling the heat, Jack?*

"Are you alright?" asks Beverly, her voice a cool shock back into the hospital ward, and her expression, when Will glances at her, *concerned*. Hesitant about it - she's wary of treading on his nerves, of pulling out his secrets in front of Jack with questions veering on the too personal. "You look…" She eyes Will as her sentence trails away, and apparently fails to find a good enough word to describe him. "D'you want me to grab you some water?"

"I'm fine," says Will. Probably unconvincingly, judging by the way Beverly purses her lips at him, the clammy stick of sweat Will can feel prickled across his own brow. And then, belatedly: "...Thanks."

Will keeps looking.

Much like the displays of assembled skeletons in museums, space has been left in the composition of the body discovered in Brown Memorial for its missing pieces: a shank here, a whole leg there, the strange span of a left arm between shoulder and elbow. This is a *display*, and all of it is *fastidiously* clean, the unsub leaving behind no trace evidence (found so far) and not a single drop of blood spilled where it shouldn't be on the floor. *Cleanliness is next to godliness.* The victim's tortured expression has been fixed in solidarity on the vision of Christ in Gethsemane - one of the small Tiffany windows on one of the north transept's sides. The torso has been opened up like a hollow bowl and stripped of its front ribs and inner organs, though the victim's 'modesty' has been preserved - however temporarily - in death by a scrap of spotless white cloth tied around his hips and covering his genitalia. Emulating the Lord on the cross? Probably more practical to fix in place than a fig leaf anyway.

The report confirms that the victim still has his genitals underneath said cloth, and that the victim is, apparently, biologically an alpha male. Otherwise, the report of everything missing from the body is still incomplete.

"Scent glands at the throat were removed," Will confirms, lifting his eyes from some half-finished notes from the BAU morgue to Beverly again - who is industriously chewing her

way through another one of Will's cookies as some kind of self-soothing method. Her outline shimmers and dances across the room from him, its edges and form blurred by the glacial trickle of sand down the ward's walls that only Will can seem to see, grains scattered across the room by the AC, "but the contents of the skull were untampered with?"

Another *snap* of gingerbread, timed to the *throb* of pain in Will's own skull. "The head was wholly detached from the spinal cord," says Beverly, "but our preliminary poke-around didn't notice anything missing. From that part of the vic's anatomy anyway."

"Time of, cause of death?"

Beverly scrunches up her face - they don't have anything concrete yet.

"An educated guess?"

"Either blood loss or shock; the victim was alive when the killer started taking pieces off of him." No surprise there. "It was slow. Ignoring the head, the limbs appear to have been removed from the torso at different times, maybe days apart, and then sectioned off further from there. Parts of the body were fridged, we think, and other parts were frozen and rethawed multiple times, so establishing a TOD's a bit of a nightmare."

Will traces his fingertips over the printed image of a disembodied hand, trying to still the instinctive recurring twitch of his own fingers against the surface of the photograph. "Killed and stored elsewhere before being transported to the scene."

"The scene was discovered by a group of cleaners just before 7am on Saturday," says Jack. "Body could've been dumped any time after the staff locked up at 8 the night before."

That's a very forgiving amount of time for the killer to set up his tableau. And with all the whimsy inherent in the scene, the clear surgical and forensic skill and experience on display, the sense of aesthetics…

"It's our guy," says Will. The unsub from the Pagoda. The Chesapeake Ripper.

"Yeah?" Jack asks, his brows lifting. "No chocolates or flowers this time around. Where did all the courting go?"

Rather than making a quip about all the *mood lighting* in the tableau, Will shakes his head in a sweaty toss of curls - regretting the motion immediately when the world swims and blurs in a nauseating *spin* before his eyes. "This isn't for any omega, Jack." Will closes his eyes, trying to ground himself - but his head is still reeling in the black. "*Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick.* This is for you. This is a stand-in for you."

Jack curses, and the air blooms thick and heavy with the scent of a very woody pepper-patchouli: pissed-off alpha. It sticks to the roof of Will's mouth *again*, and Will has to swallow back bile before he can speak.

"The victim matters here, because the victim resembles you. A black alpha man, around your age, called Jack. Driver's licence makes a point that the victim *is* a Jack, especially since the

one from the Pagoda is still a John Doe." Will dares to crack his eyes open again, watching the swimming world through a squint of eyelashes, Jack's face twisted in a resigned kind of wrath. Thankfully, the fury is not directed at Will. Or Beverly. "...You thought so too."

Jack huffs. "Had my suspicions. You think it's a direct threat?"

Will dares to try and shake his head again, slower than before. His mind feels like it's lagging a full second behind his physical form, sluggishly trailing the movement of his skull like the afterimage left by a lit sparkler being waved through the air. "Just an example for study."

That is evidently a bitter pill for Jack Crawford to swallow: the Ripper thinks he requires instruction. Jack makes a face like he's just sucked on a wedge of sour lemon - and Will is about to hand him the rest of the fruit to consume as well.

"According to the Ripper, you're going to pieces. Your pluck's gone. You've certainly lost your guts." Jack *glares,* and Will redirects his ire to the true source deserving of it by handing the alpha the close-up photograph of Jack Landry's hollowed-out torso. An unnatural curve of pink flesh and bone. "It's a mockery; it's meant to hurt. Your proxy is chasing shadows and fumbling through a labyrinth whose walls he cannot see in search of answers. Leaping over flames - fortune-telling instead of science."

Will waits a moment for Jack to finish scowling down at the photograph now in his hands before adding, airily, his mind now as good as sitting beside himself on the sofa rather than at home within its usual fleshy walls:

"...Said or done anything in particular lately to irritate the Chesapeake Ripper, Jack?"

Beverly's soft little *ha* of awe sounds as though it reaches Will from the end of a long, darkening and echoing tunnel. "Jimmy was impressed that, out of everything, the killer left the vic's junk behind."

"Didn't need it for the lesson at hand," says Will. Starts slowly sweeping the reports back into their folder, his hands still trembling on his lap. Why can't he *focus*? "This isn't a dick-measuring contest. In our killer's opinion, this isn't a contest at all."

Beverly sits up, forward, in a squeak of leather. Invested now that Will's cattiness has come out to play. "A few of the agents on-scene thought the tableau was a criticism against organised religion or, at the least, affluent American conservative Christianity - but the current senior pastor is actually known for his liberal, progressive views about. Well, pretty much everything. Big on marriage equality and gender/dynamic recognition for all, rebuilding damaged communities, reducing poverty and feeding the hungry. Sponsors a lot of after-school activities to get kids off the streets, invest in their futures."

"Sounds like a great guy," Will says absently. Distantly.

"Yeah, right? So another agent suggested that maybe the tableau's location is a protest against the rise in social justice warriors."

Will snorts - half a beat too slow to his own ears. Neither Jack nor Beverly seem to notice, Beverly still an eager face in a corona of golden, sand-coloured light when Will looks her way. Shimmering in his vision like a desert mirage. “No. The Ripper liked the windows.”

All that wonderful, serene, rippled blue light. Dancing through heaven, through a dream.

“The *windows?!*” Jack explodes, unable to restrain himself any longer.

A photograph flutters from Will’s lap to the floor, and Will bends to retrieve it. Miscalculates, and has papers and photographs falling around him like autumn leaves in a swirling breeze. A twirl of gold and cream and heaven’s blue, all falling down.

The main window in the north transept of the church is one of the Tiffany pieces: the Annunciation to the Shepherds. Blue glass - a field of stars, the night sky, and the heavenly host above in golden splendour. Singing the good news to the shepherds watching their flock on the hills below, startled from their rest around the fire that keeps them warm. In the distance behind them, Bethlehem glows like a promise, the path made clear by the star shining bright over the town. *The Christ is born.*

A pendulum swings and Will stands in Brown Memorial, looking up at the window. The serene blue light of heaven on his uplifted face, the heat of the shepherds’ fire on his hands. Flickering flames in the seraphim above, flickering flames of the campfire on the earth below, and *below* that below, there, in the transept, hell in the rings of candles and their dancing flames, wild shadows that claw at Will’s feet and ankles, hot wax that pools around his soles and fixes him in place. The body in front of him - sharp and heavy with savoury iron and bittersweet impossible lavender in Will’s lungs - and behind -

Behind, a warm and breathing shadow, a living body that presses itself to Will’s spine. A large, warm hand that wraps around Will’s throat and stoppers the sour, churning nausea rising up from his gut, closing off the access of oxygen to Will’s lungs and lifting Will’s eyes to the Star of Bethlehem. It shines.

It shines; it shines. The world dims dark black around the edges and still the star shines leading onwards those that believe.

Another hand slides possessively around Will’s waist from behind, an anchor over his churning belly. Pulling him backwards and down into the enveloping black, the darkness below even the fire.

Fangs press to his nape in an unseen smile. “‘What rough beast, its hour come round at last,/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?’”

“*Don’t* - ” Will gasps - and then chokes on his own vomit, lavender and iron. *Don’t. Don’t.* Don’t.

The star dims in the spotting of his own vision. The night grows. He can’t *breathe* -

"...Will? *Will!"*

Sunday finds Hannibal shopping in D.C. He is there, primarily, to collect items he had preordered up to a few weeks before - a new tailored suit and matching shirt cut in the omega style, all black and accented with delicate, almost invisible, golden pinstripes; two Montblanc Solitaire fountain pens (one black, gilded with gold-leaf detailing, and the cheaper second engraved with an intricate hexagonal pattern covered in a deep blue lacquer); a bespoke rosewood puzzle box he had commissioned with the delight of Ellen Komeda in mind, and the ruby-studded antique brooch Hannibal intends to go inside of it - but there is time as well for more impulsive indulgences.

There are silk scarves in a variety of colours and patterns from Hermès. Another scarf from Brunello Cucinelli - long and grey this time, with a subtle plaid pattern and made of silk and cashmere - and a pair of leather gloves. New linen napkins in snow white and deepest evening blue, and several sets of napkin rings by a new designer, made of brass with brilliant, delicate beetles crafted out of zinc and sparkling blue glass with an antique silver finish adorning them. Sweet pastries from a local bakery/café, individually boxed.

Brunch comes by way of a dual-concept Italian osteria and mercato. Hannibal settles into a seat at the osteria and orders *a legna*: breast from a duck roasted in the establishment's woodfire oven, served with roasted fennel, wedges of Maryland plums and an orange marmellata. A glass of a fine young sangiovese beside, a Ciacci di Piccolomini d'Aragona from the Rosso di Montalcino region of Tuscany. Sweet and fruity on the tongue, warming in the belly.

Hannibal is invigorated after his meal and makes his way to the attached mercato after settling the bill, pleased to discover more of the marmellata in jars there for purchase. Alongside this acquisition is added a selection of the mercato's hand-made mortadella, salami and a few links of 'nduja sausages, and several wedges of imported Italian cheese and three more bottles of the same wine Hannibal had enjoyed so much in the osteria join the marmellata before Hannibal declares himself satisfied.

There is a newly-mated alpha/omega couple in the jeweller's when Hannibal enters that store. It is obvious the two are on their honeymoon still: the bites on their throats are still fresh, their bodies are flush with bonding hormones that cannot escape Hannibal's nose, and the - either black or biracial - female omega is wearing her thick, glossy black hair tied up and

twisted with golden threads in the fashion many African American omegas with longer hair seem to prefer for their bonding ceremonies and the few weeks afterwards.

The woman's smile gleams almost as brightly as the threads in her hair; she and her mate, it appears, are picking out various collars for her to wear in their new life together.

The piece Hannibal is there to collect is not an omega collar. It is certainly worth more than all of the collars the new mates on the other side of the store have picked out so far put together, requiring Hannibal to be respectfully ushered over to his own little private area by a handful of fawning assistants as they bring out his order in its velvet case from a safe at the back.

The case is opened, and an eternity of rainbows immediately flares out into the surrounding area, light reflected and refracted from and through over 20 carats of brilliant multi-shaped diamonds set into the twisted, intertwined body of a platinum snake. A necklace of meticulous beauty, smooth to touch and supple like the creature it is shaped to embody, the snake ripples enticingly as Hannibal lifts it from its bed with both hands to admire the large Sri Lankan sapphire dangling from the serpent's head.

The focal teardrop-shaped jewel is over 61 carats and that most precious of shades in sapphires: a perfect cornflower blue. It had reminded Hannibal of Will when he had first seen it - perhaps all the blues of the world belong to Will now, every shade in the stunning depths of his eyes -, and the serpentine design as a whole of both the Lecter and Visconti coats of arms: a great twisting snake swallowing a man. Here, as a necklace, the man at the snake's fangs has been replaced by a sapphire, a stunning jewel to be jealously guarded in place of devouring one's foe.

Hannibal holds up the necklace to the silent admiration of all who see it, and imagines the piece already clasped around Will's smooth pale throat. Platinum, diamonds, sapphire, all as captivating as the man wearing them. The glare of Will's eyes above almost equalled by the serpent's warning *hiss.* What need is there for an engraved omega collar when such a piece of jewellery declares ownership all by itself?

"Beautiful," Hannibal declares - to the fervent agreement of the assistants attending him -, and places the necklace back into its home to be discreetly wrapped and bagged before being returned to him.

His personal cell phone rings as he steps out of the jeweller's again perhaps ten minutes later - an unknown number, but persistent enough they immediately call a second time after Hannibal lets the first call ring through to his voicemail.

Hannibal answers, shuffling most of his bags to the crook of one arm and stepping to the side of the sidewalk out of the main flow of human traffic. "Hello?"

An adult male voice on the other end, briskly professional: "Would I be speaking to a Dr. Hannibal Lecter?"

Hannibal frowns. The only individuals who should have access to his personal number all know *exactly* who they are calling. "This is he."

“Good morning, Dr. Lecter. My name is Dr. Choi, a neurologist at Noble Hills Health Care Centre. I’m calling you on behalf of your friend and our patient, Mstr. Will Graham. I’m afraid I must inform you that-”

“Is he dead?” Hannibal asks bluntly, uncaring of the world and people passing on the sidewalk around him, his grip threatening to crack the case of his phone.

“No,” says Dr. Choi after half a beat for his brain to catch up with him - thus sparing the life of Hannibal’s phone, Dr. Choi’s own life, and the lives of every other insufferable *pig* unfit to draw breath standing between Hannibal and Baltimore. Hannibal is still stalking down the streets of Washington D.C in the direction of the parking lot in which he had left his car, the long brisk strides of his legs swallowing up the distance in no time at all. “Both Mstr. Graham and his unborn child are alive and currently in a stable condition, but I’m afraid I must inform you that, shortly after 10.30am this morning, Mstr. Graham suffered a sudden focal to bilateral tonic-clonic seizure and lost consciousness for approximately 4 minutes. We took him for tests immediately after he regained consciousness and, though mildly disorientated, our initial results suggest he appears to have suffered no lasting ill-effects from the event.”

“4 minutes is pushing the upper limit advisable for tonic-clonic seizures before seeking emergency medical attention,” Hannibal snaps down the phone. “What medication was administered to the patient?”

“Mstr. Graham regained consciousness before medication was required in this instance,” says Dr. Choi, maintaining his cool despite the evidence of Hannibal’s glacial wrath in his ears. “Though his medical team are already in discussion about how to prevent further seizures going forward.”

“And where *is* Mstr. Graham’s usual medical team? Was Dr. Sutcliffe unavailable to call me with this information?”

A delicate - *telling* - pause. “...Dr. Sutcliffe prefers not to work on Sundays,” says Dr. Choi. “Except in case of emergencies.”

“I *see,*” says Hannibal, hell itself encapsulated in two words and frozen thickly over in a deep and howling winter. “I will be there in approximately an hour and a half.”

Here is a sanctuary: a bower of antlers, their sharp branching tines sensuously locked together to form a barrier-shield-*cocoon* between safety and a world of mirror shards. Inside dreams a world of blue and moonish silver, soft silks and cottons, the layers of robes that drape Will’s body and puddle around him and over the cushions, pillows and blankets below.

The babe in Will's arms is halfway to sleep, their little pink mouth stretching for a moment in a yawn, glossy chocolate-coloured baby curls spilling across Will's forearm as the child drowsily turns closer to his chest. One small fist reaches up to rub clumsily at eyes fringed by lashes so fine and tiny and perfect they feel *impossible,* the big, slumberous blue eyes below reluctant to stay closed, determined to flutter open - again! Again! - to look up at Will in wonder, head tipped sleepily into the soft adoration of Will's fingertip brushing over the delicate round of one cheek.

Will can see stars in those eyes between slow, sleepy blinks - a crown of golden stars on his brow, reflected back at him in the eyes of his child, and his heart fills with the bright fierce heat of love and supernovas. A kiss on his baby's brow as his own eyes close, beading with wet emotion, and Abigail, Abigail is smiling and weeping too when Will's eyes open again to see her where the babe had been, kneeling, clasped in his arms with a soft smooth cloak of raven's feathers down her back. Another peaceful child, turning her face trustingly against Will's throat when Will brushes his fingers against her cheek, her arms wrapped around his waist. A circle of love, love returned.

"Do not be afraid," says Abigail, and the ends of her hair are burning, and the hem of her cloak is burning, and the hem of Will's robes and all the silver and blue is licked by fire.

Will is not afraid, his heart still full with fire as well. Consumed but still whole, beating.

Abigail is smiling still, and her tears against the soothing swipe of Will's thumb are sticky and warm. "Will?"

Ravens' wings rustle against Will's eyelashes and he blinks, blinks, and slowly comprehends that Abigail is gone and he appears to be looking at an incredibly boring ceiling. That he is lying on his back looking *up* at - or perhaps *through* - an incredibly boring ceiling, his gaze lost to the great big nothing in the middle distance of his view. Dreaming? *Fuck.*

"...Will," says a very familiar voice - that is definitely *not* Abigail's - from somewhere over on his right, "can you hear me?"

Will is nodding slowly, creakily, even as his gaze is focusing itself and he - with increasing reluctance - regains his bearings. Slides back into a skull that doesn't seem very happy to see him again, walls of bone squeezing in tight with rhythmic pain.

The catalogue adds up quickly: everything in the *here*, in the *now,* in fact, sings like pain. Will feels like one big bruise all over made up of smaller bruises that twitch and twinge as he moves and breathes and turns his head on his pillow to look over at Hannibal, sitting in a chair on the right of Will's hospital bed.

Hannibal smiles when Will makes eye contact with him, four fingers and one thumb tightening their grip briefly around the limp creature that is currently Will's right hand. Abruptly reminding Will *of* his hands and the fact Hannibal is holding one of them.

"Hannibal," Will says stupidly. Will *thinks* he says. His lips and tongue feel heavy and numb, and his throat has a raspy crack in the middle of it.

“Hello, darling,” says Hannibal, which is a tick in the column for Will having said something at least partially intelligible. *Yay.*

Will is taking all minor achievements as the success story that they are at the moment, because, as he slowly becomes more aware of himself and all his body’s (many, *many*) aches and pains, Will is equally as slowly realising that he feels like he’s just been hit by a truck and had his body dumped by the side of a desert road. Where vultures have been pecking at it.

What the *fuck* has he been doing to hurt so badly?

Will halfheartedly tries to give Hannibal’s hand a small squeeze back before announcing, with some resignation: “Sorry, I must have lost time again.”

The resting pout of Hannibal’s usually languorous mouth turns down at the corners. “You don’t recall the last time you woke up?”

Hannibal is wearing one of his stupidly soft-looking sweaters again today, a turtleneck in black. It’s slimming. It’s gorgeous. Looking at it makes Will pine for his collarbones and find it difficult to think of anything by the lovely long lines of Hannibal’s neck.

Will attempts to turn his mind to thoughts more useful for the current moment, wincing as even furrowing his *brow* sends spikes of pain drilling backwards into his head. “I- Jack and Beverly were here.” The faintest scents of stress, burnt vanilla and patchouli are still lingering in the air inside the ward.

Hannibal smells a little like stress and sweat, the spice and musk notes of his beta scent bleeding through the thinning of his cologne.

“They were,” Hannibal confirms (and another small tick is added to Will’s column of positives: *no prolonged and elaborate hallucinations today*). Then, much more clinically: “Can you tell me your name, the time and date, and our current location?”

Will gives him an exasperated look (*ow*).

Hannibal sits and looks very patiently back at him.

Will makes a face at Hannibal (*OW*).

Hannibal continues to regard him patiently.

“Water,” Will demands rather pettishly, and waits until Hannibal has gotten up to pour him a glass before yielding to the inevitable. “My name is Will Graham, it’s Sunday the 15th of December, and we’re sitting in my suite at the Noble Hills Health Care Centre. If you want the time, either pass me my phone or show me your watch.”

Hannibal brings Will both the water and his own wrist, pushing up one sleeve so that Will can see his watch as the omega pushes himself into a leaning position and sips at his glass. The cool liquid is a relief on Will’s throat, though it does very little for his headache, and awakens a fierce iron-tasting stinging on his lips. *Bitten* lips, great.

“You’re early,” Will observes, and reaches up to press the cool side of his glass against the particularly sharp point of pain he can feel thumping away at his left temple. Unfortunately only discovering when he does so that he has a rather tender, very physical, *lump* sitting there, and the lump does not like having hard objects gently *donk*ed against it.

For fuck’s sake.

The newest self-inflicted *throb* of pain that reverberates through Will’s skull in starburst technicolour escapes Will’s gritted teeth in a dreadful hiss, and Hannibal takes the glass away from him. The gentle *thump* of it finding a home on Will’s bedside cabinet echoed by Hannibal’s measured tones.

“I appear to be here at precisely the right time.”

“I mean-” Will has to squint at the other man through still-watering eyes, regretting *everything* - “usually you don’t swing by until later in the day.”

It’s early afternoon. Most days and even at the weekends, Hannibal prefers to arrive in the middle evening with dinner - still a good few hours away.

Hannibal just *hm*s instead of answering that. “Raise both of your arms for me.”

Will sighs but does as he’s told, holding the pose until Hannibal gently pushes his arms back down again. Keeps his hand warm and comforting on Will’s shoulder afterwards.

“Although you may not feel like it, I need you to smile.”

Will has no idea what sort of aching grimace it is that he manages to pin onto his face in response to *that* request, but Hannibal apparently gives points for effort and accepts a good ol’ *close enough.* He squeezes Will’s shoulder and takes a seat again.

“You had a seizure when Jack Crawford and Ms. Katz were here. More specifically, you had a focal to bilateral tonic-clonic seizure, and lost consciousness. Apparently, despite the fact you were sitting down on soft furnishings at the time, you *still* managed the impossible feat of hitting your head off the coffee table before Jack caught you. Thus…” A - not unsympathetic - nod to the bump on Will’s noggin.

“Chickadees out of season.”

“Tweet tweet,” says Hannibal dryly, and smiles at Will’s soft snort. It’s the first real glimpse of softness he’s given Will so far that afternoon.

“You *wish* you could accumulate this much head trauma.”

Hm again, rich now with Hannibal’s amusement. “You don’t recall coming around before, and speaking with Dr. Choi before you fell asleep again?”

Dr. Choi? “I-” Will forces himself to think back, still searching for order in the jumbled-up thoughts crammed into his tired, overheated brain, dreams and memories all tied along the same length of string. When had he- he’d been awake before this, before Hannibal. Answered

questions, barely conscious, *grumpy* about being conscious. In pain. “Uh - I remember someone in a white coat shining a bright light into my eyes. I was really tired.” Will bites his lower lip - before remembering what a stupid idea that is when it immediately *burns* and a blot of fresh blood bursts over his tongue. “I’m *still* really tired. Achy all over.”

“It isn’t unusual,” says Hannibal, and those words unlock *more* memories of another beta man saying the same to Will earlier in the day.

Of Will staring at the furrowed crease between Dr. Choi’s dark eyebrows as he’d wondered where the *fuck* Sutcliffe was the one time Will was having some kind of significant episode/event/*whatever*, of Choi’s gentle questions and bedside tests right before Will had been plopped into a wheelchair and-

Cold sludgy *fear* drops down Will’s ribcage into his middle, and his hands fly to his abdomen. “Is-” he looks at Hannibal. Plaintively. Aghast. *Answer me.* “I had an ultrasound.”

Seizures during pregnancy can affect the developing foetus. Decreasing the oxygen supply to the foetus. Slowing the foetal heartbeat. Foetal injury from falling, premature separation of the placenta from the walls of Will’s uterus, miscarriage caused by haemorrhaging or physical trauma -

The room had been crowded for Will’s ultrasound, everybody in Will’s proximity breathing in his fear and tiredness and hurting - claustrophobic. Dr. Choi, Dr. Morgan-Moore, and a technologist handling the computer. Dr. Morgan-Moore handling *Will,* Will taking small comfort in his OB-GYN’s calm unflappability, her scent of soap, summer flowers and fresh linens dried in the wind and sun a useful offset to the chemical smell of medical-grade lubricant. And then the *discomfort* of the transducer being pushed up places the sun doesn’t shine.

It had taken only a few moments for the medical team to turn the monitor screen towards Will for him to see his- his baby, to be reassured by the sound of steady *whooshing* that still makes tears prickle at Will’s eyes.

“The baby’s okay,” Will says. Then, more sternly to himself, “The baby’s *okay.* Dr. Morgan-Moore said-” he looks at Hannibal, desperate for confirmation - “I’m not imagining that?”

“You’re not,” says Hannibal, and all that tension and fear drains out of Will in one great sigh of relief that does nothing to stop Hannibal looking at Will like he’s a particularly concerning zoo exhibit. “I spoke with her as well. I can have her called up to talk to you again, if that would reassure you.”

“Yes,” says Will as he sinks back into the pillows supporting his spine once more, because that *would* - hopefully - put the last of his worry to rest. Then, belatedly realising he ought to clarify: “No- not *now.* Not right now. Thank you.” He just wants to go back to sleep. And for someone to make the pain in his head go away. And for the universe to take pity on him *this one time* and stop making him act like such a disaster in front of Hannibal.

Hannibal accepts Will’s stammering with all of his usual grace, safe harbour in the storm. “Whatever you wish for, Will. Whatever you need.”

“Dangerous promises,” Will says softly - and then does his very best not to startle when Hannibal’s hand reaches across the mattress to twine their fingers together, a promise locked and sealed.

Will couldn’t move his hand away if he wanted to. God help him, he doesn’t want to. He’s too tired, and a painful swell of emotion is building in his chest, clawing up his throat.

Hannibal’s thumb rubs gently back and forth across the back of Will’s hand. “You listed me as your medical next of kin.”

“Uh-” Somehow, Will still manages to feel himself flush, a dull heat that spreads over his cheeks to his ears. “Yeah. They called you in…?”

A quick glance at Hannibal’s jeans and turtleneck, a reminder of how early in the day it is. *Devastatingly* casual. The smiling crease of crow’s feet at the corners of Hannibal’s eyes.

Stupid question, Will.

Will *squirms*. “Sorry. Guess I should’ve asked you first.” Bone-weary or not, he tries to tug his hand out of Hannibal’s grip, aware of just how much his fingers twitch when he’s nervous, but Hannibal simply cups their restless movement under the heat of his own palm and squashes them flat to the bed. Answering presumption with presumption.

“I don’t mind, Will," says Hannibal. “It seems the obvious choice to make in our situation, if there’s no-one else you’d usually prefer…?”

Will *has* to laugh at that - a brief, mirthless bark that shoots pain upwards from his chest to his skull. “I usually list my neighbour, so if I’m killed in an accident she’ll know to look after the dogs. I’ve got no *kin* to speak of, Hannibal. It’s just me and the dogs, and I reckon they’d have some trouble handling forms with their paws.”

Hannibal pauses to acknowledge that. He had known already that Will had only had his father growing up, but now the good doctor is fully aware of just *how* pathetically alone Will Graham really is. No doubt putting the size of Will’s pack of dogs into this new context and re-evaluating how much support their unfortunate offspring is going to need to counteract the contribution of Will’s tragic genetic material to their make-up.

“...All that remains of my own family is an aunt by marriage and the woman who was once her ward,” Hannibal says eventually, his thumb resuming its gentle caress over the back of Will’s hand and wrist. Speaking orphan to orphan, almost idly: “I suppose it would not be inaccurate to call the latter my cousin, by choice and commitment if not by blood. We lived and grew up together for some time in France in our youth.”

“...Are you close?”

“Estranged, but not inhospitable. The distance between us all inches closer by increments, as the bird wipes its beak every century on the diamond mountain and slowly wears away its heights.”

"...Dedicated bird," Will says tactfully, and is rewarded by the wryly amused curl of Hannibal's smile. Apparently the beta is an optimist. With an aunt and cousin who bear grudges. "You're really okay with the whole next of kin thing?"

"As long as you are," Hannibal tells him. "I'm humbled that you'd choose to place your trust in me."

Will tilts his head just so he can look at the other man askance. Witness the side-eye, squinty as it is due to headache. "Bullshit." Hannibal couldn't do true humility if it stripped naked in front of him wearing nothing but a glittery ribbon and *FUCK ME* tattooed on its ass. "But if I can't trust you with my medical info by this point, I'm already too screwed for it to matter."

The tips of Hannibal's crooked teeth show endearingly when he grins. "As always, you remain the point where faith meets pragmatism." Nice way of calling Will a cynic. "Have you any idea what may have triggered your seizure?"

A slow shake of the head, a metronome to the rhythmic *throb* in Will's skull. "I wasn't feeling too great, and then Jack and Beverly showed up." Will pauses, then adds, "Jack brought a case file."

Hannibal's grin falls into an immediate flat line. "I see."

"He said you suggested he visit."

"As a concerned friend. Certainly not to bother you with work whilst you're on medical leave." *Hm.* "You looked at the file for him?"

It seems like Will's expression is answer enough, because Hannibal finally releases Will's hand. Sits back in his own chair, leaving Will feeling stupidly chastened and bereft on the bed.

"It was the Ripper," Will says, aware even as the words are coming out of his mouth how defensive he sounds. Feeling, once more, like he *has* to defend Jack's decisions even when they inconvenience himself. "The incident over at Brown Memorial Church. Making a dig at Jack."

"And what was Jack's response?"

Will grimaces. "The Ripper butchered up Jack Crawford's proxy and presented it to him just to call him gutless and slow. You can imagine for *yourself* what Jack thought of that." He wraps his arms around himself at the memory - realising half a beat after the fact that it's self-soothing behaviour, as bad as Beverly and cookies. *Ugh.* "...You once said Jack sees me as fine china used for special guests. Beginning to feel more like an old mug."

"You entered into a Devil's Bargain with Jack Crawford," Hannibal observes. Solemn. "Takes a toll."

Will shakes his head once more - and is more pleased than he can say when Hannibal reaches in again to brush his tangled hair away from his cheeks, his long fingers gentle around the

tender curve of Will's ear. "Jack's not the Devil," he says, just shy of entreating.

Hannibal remains firm, even as his fingertips drop from Will's jaw. "When it comes to how far he's willing to push you to get what he wants, Jack's certainly no saint."

Will subsides into a tired quiet as he takes that in and turns it over in his mind, grateful when Hannibal hands him back the glass of water to sip at. Even more grateful when Hannibal takes on the burden of conversation and changes the topic to something lighter: Hannibal had, apparently, been Christmas shopping that morning, where he had, as far as Will can gather from between all the pretentious waffling about the origins of silk and silk painting techniques, impulse-bought himself a great many scarves that he has absolutely no purpose for. He's considering using them as wrapping cloth for gifts - an idea that is so wholly alien to Will (who considers himself lucky if he remembers to pick up a roll of wrapping paper at the garage on his drive home to Wolf Trap, never mind actually remembering to *wrap* presents for other people), Will magnanimously decides to just let that consideration drift in one ear and out the other lest it cause a heart attack in the middle about the amount of time and money Hannibal puts into the simplest of things.

It's pleasant just listening to Hannibal talk, anyway, even if Will isn't actually *listening* to him. Hannibal, a born storyteller and pedagogue, has a wonderful, rich voice, and his accent curls around Will's weary mind like a lullaby, following Will down as he sinks back into his pillows.

A small paper box suddenly being presented to Will's face is enough to startle Will back into wakefulness, and he sloshes the last dregs of water in his glass down his front. A spatter of droplets, lukewarm. "Uh-"

"A gåsebryst," says Hannibal, smoothly plucking the glass from Will's fumbling grip so Will can pick at the red satin ribbon holding the box closed instead. Revealing the pretty plum-sized… dumpling thing inside that has been drizzled with chocolate and decorated with tiny flowers made of either icing sugar or marzipan. It smells like sugar and almonds, and Will's mouth waters immediately. "A Danish pastry-based cream cake. Puff pastry, plum jam, whipped and vanilla cream, icing and a coat of marzipan."

"...I can eat it?" Will asks - perhaps a little stupidly. His heart thumps; his head thumps as well. There's only one pastry-cake-thing in the box.

Hannibal's lips twitch *again.* "Preferably. If you wish to admire it a bit longer though, I'd hardly be offended."

"You could *wear* it," Will suggests as a halfhearted threat, sighing through his nose at the reemergence of Hannibal's amused grin. "Though, knowing you, you'd make it the *dernier cri.*"

"And stand accused of imitating the infamous meat dress, already several years old? You wound me."

Will does *something* alright, but he's a bit preoccupied trying not to choke on his own spit at the strange reality of Hannibal Lecter referencing *Lady Gaga.*

Hannibal refuses to take pity on Will's - further - brain-breakage, pressing forward with one of those requests Will has noticed Hannibal likes to make when Will has already been softened up with gifts. Usually food. (Will almost feels like pointing out the gingerbread Jack had brought him so Hannibal can note the similarity of methods at use.) "If you're amenable, I'd like to take you out of the hospital on Friday evening."

"Friday?" *On top of the invite to Hannibal's home for Christmas?*

"This Friday."

"I- *why?"* asks Will, bewildered. "Where?"

"For a *surprise*," says Hannibal, just shy of teasing, as though that answers *anything.*

Will eyes him suspiciously, setting aside the gåsebryst on the mattress beside his legs. "...It's not a fancy Christmas gala thing full of all your richest, snobbiest acquaintances?"

Hannibal huffs out a soft laugh, indulgent of Will's natural suspicion. "You seem to have developed quite a dislike for the sort of 'fancy gala things' I go to on occasion, Will," he says, "despite never having accompanied me to one." Pausing before adding a deliberate, wicked, "Yet."

Will bears grumpily exasperated fangs at the other man, chirping in disgust.

"An event such as that would most likely be too taxing for you at the moment," Hannibal assures him, as though Will can't see him still talking in hypotheticals. "What if I promise you that it's a *nice* surprise?"

"Cross your heart and hope to die?" Will asks sardonically, snorting at the open hand Hannibal lays over his own heart. Will caves - not that he'd had much resistance in the first place. "You even sure the hospital'll let me go after having a seizure?" For the Christmas visit as well, something Will has rather childishly pinned some hopes on.

"I'll press your case," says Hannibal with the kind of casual nonchalance only a man with considerable monetary, social *and* professional clout could successfully pull off. "Your medical team will likely want to start you on drugs to reduce the chance for further seizures in the future, which should assist."

"*Yay*," Will drawls, and reaches up a hand to carefully rub at his aching temples. "More things to make me barf."

It earns him another amused look from Hannibal (*yeah,* Will thinks in immediate pettish response, *let's see you keep that look on your face if I vomit on your* lap), but Hannibal does get up again to fetch him a fresh glass of water. Still wary of being replaced by a trained monkey, no doubt.

"…We should talk," says Will, accepting the glass when it's brought to him again. Hesitating around his next words as Hannibal looks at him inquiringly, settling back into his seat - "About my medical team. You and Sutcliffe, were you…"

A long pause.

“Were we what?” asks Hannibal when Will fails to finish his question.

Congratulations, Will. This isn’t awkward at all.

Will stares down at his water rather than drinking it. Or making eye contact with Hannibal. It’s been bothering Will for a while now and there’s no other way to say it so - *say it the insulting way.* “He resents the length of time you spend with me. Because you’re not dedicating that time or attention to him.”

“Are you sure?” A beat, and then Hannibal remembers who he’s talking to: *Mstr. Empathy Disorder.* Will is rarely wrong about these things - or at least, rarely far off the mark. “That’s troubling.”

“It’s possessive,” Will says. “And bitter.” *And it’s affecting his work.* “So I was- uh, I was wondering if you and he had ever had the kind of relationship which would lead him- would give him expectations. About you. Or would explain why he’s jealous.”

Hannibal *hmm*s, a two-note reverberation at the back of his throat. “Aside from the fact he’s sexually attracted to me, and you’ve clearly been in my bed at least once?” A very wry glance down at Will’s abdomen - the tell-tale tadpole - as Will pout-glowers at Hannibal’s chin. (The bastard *had* noticed Sutcliffe coming on to him, and he’d allowed Will to choke on the smothering scent of syrup and clary sage in silence.) “Donald and I had a brief fling many years ago. He broke it off because he aspired to have the social advantages of an alpha mate, and because he believed that a beta with my kind of personality would be a deterrent to the kind of alpha that he was searching for that might also accept entering a triad.”

…That has got to be the most blasé telling of a bitter break-up story Will has ever heard.

He squints at Hannibal. “You don’t seem very upset about that.”

“It was an amicable break-up. Donald was always very clever in the surgery, the classroom and occasionally the bedroom, but in all other aspects would have made a poor life-partner.”

Ouch.

“His feelings seem to have changed since then,” Will points out.

“Mine have not,” says Hannibal, which soothes something Will hadn’t even realised had been niggling at him inside his chest. “It wasn’t a lie to describe him as an old friend. Though perhaps -” Hannibal’s tone turns impossibly colder, crisp as the winter frost as he gazes past Will with a visible twist of displeasure on his face - “I should rethink my affiliation with him if his professional standards have slipped so low that he’d resort to bullying a patient in a fit of envious pique. Not to mention his failure to rush to the hospital after your seizure today.”

“I had-” Will stalls, already forgetting his replacement doctor’s name.

“Dr. Choi.” That was it.

“I had Dr. Choi. And Dr. Morgan-Moore.”

“Yes,” Hannibal says, the black glint of his pupils promising the same danger as the large shadows that drift under the ice on frozen lakes, “and you *should* have had Dr. Sutcliffe as well.”

Brr. There is no arguing with Hannibal’s pronouncement in that particularly chilly tone - not that Will had been thinking about trying to defend Donald Sutcliffe anyway. Will isn’t thinking about much of anything except the pain in his head and body and watching the frozen *sear* of Hannibal’s temper about this topic - because Hannibal *is* furious, Will can see that now. Restraint shown in the tight lines around the doctor’s eyes and mouth, the twitch-*clench* of his hands into Will’s bed linen by Will’s thighs. An explanation for the scent of his stress and sweat, simmering in his own emotions as he’d sat at Will’s bedside and waited for Will to wake up.

He’d probably laid into Will's medical team with all the cold, clinical wrath of a former ER doctor, displeased at the handling of a patient’s treatment.

Will bumps up against the beta’s knuckles with his gåsebryst box, relieved when Hannibal’s gaze softens on him. *So you’re not mad at* me. Picking out all the whiskey-gold flecks in Hannibal’s eyes, all the warmth still stored there. And relief. *You were worried. And you don’t know what to do with that.*

Hannibal had left his Christmas shopping trip and rushed to the hospital when they’d called him to let him know Will had had a seizure. He’d been worried - so, *so* worried -, and worry is not an emotion that Hannibal Lecter is accustomed to dealing with. Especially not handed to him suddenly and involuntarily. So Hannibal is refocusing all that energy into anger instead.

It’s probably not the healthiest response - and for a *psychiatrist,* oh, *Medice, cura te ipsum* -, but it speaks volumes as to the unexpected depth of Hannibal’s feelings about Will, his sickness, and their baby. To shake the calm, seemingly impenetrable façade of Hannibal’s exterior until even the foundations tremble.

‘Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch, Will muses, touched and startled all at once. Then, hearing himself think: *Oh.*

Oh.

Oh.

A loop of white noise turning over and over in Will’s head. (*Oh.*) He swallows, and then taps the side of the gåsebryst's box. “I’ll- uh, I’ll have this in a little while, after something plainer to settle my stomach.” He smiles, hesitatingly, at Hannibal - relieved when the other man smiles much more warmly back. He really isn’t that hungry, but he needs time and space to *think.* “Do you think you could call one of the nurses in and get me something to eat? I slept through lunch.”

Chapter End Notes

Éclair: (from French *éclairer*, 'to light up/brighten') 1, a lightning bolt, 2, a flash, 3, a sparkle, 4, a small chocolate-covered vanilla crème-filled pastry puff in a general oblong shape. The English/American version of the pastry is typically larger than the miniature French version, and different kinds of filling and topping may be used instead of vanilla crème and chocolate.

Sorry for the long wait for this chapter; I've had a lot on my plate, and another bout of COVID to shake off in the past few weeks. In the middle of a heatwave. Not fun.

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? - W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*
'Tis a fearful thing to love/ what death can touch. - Yehuda Halevi, *'Tis a Fearful Thing* (translation attributed to Chaim Stern)

Hannibal going into stupidly extensive detail about shopping for luxury goods is 100% true to book canon, and now you all get to suffer it too.
The blue rainbow bug napkin rings by Joanna Buchanan. (Where are these sold in the USA? I don't know. Harrods has them, at a mark-up price.)
The Serpenti Ocean Treasure necklace by BVLGARI. (Anne Hathaway wore this necklace in the promotional photoshoot with Zendaya, and she and Hugh Dancy have a very similar complexion, so…)

(Medical) Next of kin - apparently - means something different in the USA than it does in the UK, but I'd written the scene before I learnt this and this is an a/b/o AU already so. You get the UK definition because *it's my party and I can cry if I want to.*
Medically (and entirely separate from issues of inheritance), next of kin in the UK are simply the people you nominate (on a hospital form) that you wish to receive information about your ongoing health/status. Next of kin do not have to be related to you. If you don't nominate someone, the hospital usually assumes your spouse or a close (adult) blood relative fulfils this role. Next of kin have no legal rights, and (if you are unable to vouch for yourself) cannot give consent for providing or withholding care. They can, however, *advise* (and will likely be asked by) medical staff about your wishes. In the event of your death, they may be required to give permission for a consented postmortem (but this can, in certain cases, be overruled).

If you're wondering what on earth Hannibal is on about when he's talking about birds and diamond mountains, it's an allusion to the fairytale, *The Shepherd Boy*, and a question about the length of eternity.

A recipe for gåsebryst.

Lady Gaga's Meat Dress.

bouillabaisse

Chapter Summary

Bedelia and Beverly lend a sounding ear each.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"How did your patients react to their appointments being rescheduled?"

Even when confronted with the realities of a last-minute appointment with her most/least favoured and *only* patient, Bedelia Du Maurier remains a force of nature - the bitter frost, perhaps, that is found in the abrupt lull of a winter storm. That moment of mingled relief and dreadful anticipation when the blizzard's winds die suddenly, and the loud silence which follows allows one to hear each precise creak and crack of the ice beneath one's feet.

Hannibal appreciates it, both the tranquillity and the threat, these little *tête-à-têtes* in Bedelia's parlour. The space gives him the opportunity to reflect on and organise his thoughts, and his conversations with Bedelia both soothe and invigorate his mind. A fixed point of normalcy to use as reference in his dealings with others during what, even he will admit, are currently very busy and unexpected days.

So Hannibal smiles at Bedelia across from him in her own seat, affecting humble gratitude with a dip of his head. "The majority reacted with grace and understanding. A few required some reassurance from myself before agreeing to have their appointments postponed until later this week."

Monday morning: more than half of Hannibal's patients with an appointment scheduled for that day had been disgruntled to receive an early phonecall from the doctor rescheduling their appointment, but the wisest of them had quickly mellowed and accepted Hannibal's solicitous apologies. A few had had some understandable concerns that had required alleviating, and, of the persistently sour remainder, Hannibal has drawn up a short list of patients that he will slowly be referring out to other psychiatrists in the coming weeks.

Dullness in a patient is bad enough, but dullness *and* a rude disregard for the needs of others is intolerable.

"Some worry is to be expected," Bedelia points out. The alpha pheromones in her perfume are particularly pungent in the room around them this morning, freshly-applied, and the ice-blonde curls of her hair are less pristine than usual: Hannibal had interrupted her morning routine with an early phonecall as well. "It is rare for you to cancel or reschedule your appointments with less than two days' worth of notice."

A valid point. Except in exceptional circumstances, Hannibal finds cancellations within such a short timeframe to be terribly rude. But exceptional circumstances are not *that* uncommon. “It is not the first time I have had to cancel or reschedule appointments for my patients.”

“And yet,” Bedelia counters, “it is unusual for you to do so whilst citing a personal emergency.” More slyly: “The explanation must have come as some surprise to your patients: a *personal emergency* is most commonly used as a euphemism for the sudden and unexpected onset of one’s heat or rut. Neither of which you experience as a beta individual.”

Further elaboration is not required. Both Hannibal and Bedelia, as beta psychiatrists, are already aware that some patients deliberately seek out beta individuals to employ them for recurring services - be that as personal therapists, maids or otherwise - precisely for the reason that betas do not experience heats or ruts. Betas are in theory, therefore, much less likely than alphas and omegas to suddenly take time off work.

Theory rarely proves true when confronted by the practicalities of modern life.

“The phrase can cover a multitude of situations and circumstances,” Hannibal expounds. A mild deflection with a nod to the reality which Bedelia already understands. “I could, for example, be assisting another with their heat or rut.”

It is no surprise that Bedelia calls him out on it, another *crack* of the ice underfoot. “You did not reschedule your appointments to assist another with heat or rut.”

Hannibal did not - more’s the pity. Hannibal had decided to take a day off from his patients to reorganise the disordered corners of his Mind Palace, to sift through his unexpected thoughts about the day before and tame them before they cause him to act too much - and too dangerously - on impulse. Taking action, here, in this space where the winds have died down and the frost gleams and refracts the winter sunlight through the lens of Bedelia’s insight: cold but clear.

It is appropriate that Bedelia has chosen to wear a blouse in wintry green today. Always fond of solid block colours in her wardrobe, Bedelia’s satiny shirt this morning is the same shimmering shade of a frost-laced Douglas fir, a tree ready to be felled just in time for Christmas.

“Will Graham had a seizure yesterday,” says Hannibal. “Sudden focal to bilateral tonic-clonic. He lost consciousness for approximately four minutes.”

Bedelia blinks once. The golden brooch at her throat gleams once in the light, icy tuberose woven through a fir’s branches. “Were you with him at the time?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “I was not." He had not considered the possibility that Jack Crawford's presence - armed with a case file - would provoke such a reaction from Will. "A member of the hospital’s medical team contacted me via phone to inform me.”

“What was your response?”

Uncharacteristic. “Before the doctor could recount what had happened, I asked if Will was dead.”

“Your mind leapt to the worst case scenario.”

There are fates worse than death alone. Hannibal ponders, then, what the worst case scenario for Will Graham might be. In his eyes. In Will’s.

“I imagined he was dead,” says Hannibal. “I could see it in my mind’s eye quite vividly.”

How the pallor of death would look on Will’s fair complexion, cold flesh set in juxtaposition to a gleaming mortuary slab. The hard glassiness death would bring to the blue of Will’s eyes before the colour turned milky and was lost to the world forever. The rhythm of two heartbeats turning into a ceaseless beep on the monitor - and then silence.

“How did that make you feel?” Bedelia inquires.

“Cold,” says Hannibal. And then, “Angry.”

“With what or whom?” Bedelia asks him - and then answers herself with what she reads in Hannibal’s face. “At a situation beyond your control.”

From his recollection of that moment on the D.C sidewalk, phone held up to his ear, Hannibal can only remember feeling a directionless wrath against both heaven and earth. Explicit direction for his ire had only come along later, once he had seen Will alive and well in person - and with it, purpose.

“In your time as a surgeon and medical practitioner, you must have seen patients have seizures before,” Bedelia says. “Can you recall if any of them inspired similar feelings in yourself?”

“I left surgery for psychiatry after the death of a patient on the operating table,” Hannibal reminds her.

Bedelia shifts in her seat, uncrossing her legs and then crossing them again with her other leg on top. “Will Graham has a seizure, and you - unusually and abruptly - take the following day off work.”

Placed in chronological context and spoken aloud with Bedelia’s tongue, the events sound damning. And they *feel* different, hearing them spoken aloud. But of course they do.

Inwardly, Hannibal marvels.

“Even under the most skilled hands, every life cannot be saved, Hannibal,” says Bedelia. Pausing to let the weight of her words sink in, “Absolute control belongs to no-one.”

No lies here about the potentiality of a kind, omniscient and omnipotent god.

“I have often observed that the chaos of change is what brings both meaning and beauty to life,” Hannibal offers. All experiments require an uncontrolled variable; why should

existence itself be an exception? “The transience of both creation and destruction. We as a species have existed for over 100,000 years. In that time 100 billion human lives have had beginnings and endings.”

“100 billion lives haven’t impacted yours,” says Bedelia. “Clearly Will Graham’s life has, and that seems to surprise you.”

Hannibal cannot deny it. Will is… Will is something *new.* “Will is my friend.”

“Why? Why is he your friend?”

“He sees his own mentality as grotesque but useful,” says Hannibal, “like a chair of antlers. He can’t anticipate his thoughts. He can't block them. He can't repress who he is. There’s an honesty in that I admire.”

“I imagine there's an honesty in that you can relate to,” Bedelia says, dry, for a moment, as some of her preferred vintages of white wine. Before Hannibal can remark upon it, she continues: “What can't you repress, Hannibal?”

Hannibal allows himself the barest glimmer of a smile, deliberately catching Bedelia’s gaze with his own. “I plan to court him.”

“Will Graham is an alpha?” Bedelia reads Hannibal’s reply in the gleam of his eye. “An omega.” She barely hides her dismay, all the branches formed by the creases of her fir-coloured blouse rustling as she shifts once again in her seat.

Hannibal leans back comfortably into the cushions of his own. “I will not say his dynamic has no bearing on my decision, but I believe I would pursue him regardless of it.”

“Is that wise?” Bedelia asks him. Her shoulders stiffening in a front of resistance to Hannibal’s answering forbidding look - “As your psychiatrist, I am obliged to advise that you consider the ethical ramifications of asking to court an individual whose mental state may currently be compromised.”

Hannibal has already considered the ramifications - ethical, practical, and aesthetical - of his decision, and at great length. “If I were to assume that, based on prior interactions with said individual, he would be amenable regardless of his current illness?”

Bedelia tries again. “You say that Will Graham is your friend - perhaps the only person you have ever found *worthy* to be your friend. Should your romantic pursuit of him go badly, Hannibal, you stand to potentially lose that friendship.”

Hannibal tilts his head. Curious. “Do you believe me to be incapable of maintaining a romantic relationship with another?”

Bedelia refuses to give him a direct answer. “All relationships require strong foundations if they are to survive for any length of time. What foundations are your relationship with Will Graham built upon?”

“We are alike, he and I.”

Bedelia herself has already observed that Will has many traits that Hannibal can relate to. Will is as unique upon this earth amongst the hordes as Hannibal is, of Hannibal's kind rather than bleating humanity's. They are kin: though separate beings, there is something in their brains and hearts, in blood and nerves, that assimilates them mentally to one another. And together -

"There is a friendship between us based upon mutual understanding," says Hannibal. As strong a foundation as any, and the dependency inherent in it efficiently cultivated. "The knowledge of seeing and being seen." He pauses for a moment before adding delicately, "The family we are already building together."

Bedelia blinks again, twice in quick succession, a startled frisson of eyelashes. "Family?"

There is a brief flare of scent in the room then under the combined scent of Bedelia's strong perfume and Hannibal's more subtle cologne: a bitter, herbaceous, greenness emerging from beneath sharp burnt spice. Artemisia and wormwood. Absinthe on fire, and the sour touch of sweat.

If the prospect of Hannibal courting someone had dismayed Bedelia, the thought of Hannibal procreating has Bedelia *alarmed.*

Hannibal smiles a touch more widely, sparing, for the moment, the rustling fir from the sight of his axe. "We share an affection for and mutual interest in the future of Abigail Hobbs, whose life we saved together."

Bedelia dares to - slightly - relax.

"Will is also pregnant with my child, swiftly approaching the end of his first trimester."

Disconcerted absinthe again, the emerald heat of it a scorch across the roof of Hannibal's mouth, stinging around the nostrils.

Hannibal takes some pity on his host and gives Bedelia some time to process his swing. "I never considered having a child," he muses aloud. "But after meeting Abigail, I understand the appeal. The opportunity to guide and support, and, in many ways, direct a life. Lives."

Bedelia scrambles for composure, a small tremble skittering down her spine as the scent of her concern slowly begins to dissipate. Too obvious a tell for her to live long in the wild. "...You have influence on her?"

"I hope I do."

An almost hesitant pause.

"Young people," Bedelia offers, "are supposed to be the lenses through which we see ourselves living beyond this life."

An interesting perspective. Not one that Hannibal necessarily agrees with, but interesting enough to examine in juxtaposition to himself.

“I am that I am,” Hannibal states simply. “I think of my earliest memory and project forward to what I imagine will be my death. I never think about living beyond that span of time. Except by reputation.”

“What of those you have influenced, however indirectly?”

“I can influence another,” says Hannibal, “I can guide and give direction, but it is up to each individual the path they ultimately choose to take.” Life is a delightful length of rope, and it is up to every soul that gains enough responsibility in the course of their existence to take it and tie the knot of their own noose. “A life is more than the sum of its influences.”

Bedelia’s lips press into a single thin line, their corners almost as white as her fingers gripping now each other on her lap. “And yet, some influences undeniably have a stronger impact than others.”

“Naturally,” Hannibal agrees. He relies upon it.

A small flurry of snowflakes greets Hannibal as he leaves the angled edges of Bedelia’s home, melting drops of ice leaving little stinging kisses on the upturned ridges of his face, speckling the shoulders of Hannibal’s grey twill overcoat with spots and splotches of white. A benediction from the heavens, a blessing as propitious as the bracingly cold air and hours of free time Hannibal now has ahead of him.

A day free from his patients spares Hannibal the time for more leisurely than usual lunch preparations in his kitchen at home. He listens to the seasonally appropriate *Concerto Grosso in G minor, Op. 6, No. 8* by Arcangelo Corelli whilst he slices, dices and simmers cubes of butternut squash, cooking and blitzing the trimmings from the gourd with butter into a vibrant, silky purée. A thrill of concertino violins and dramatic cello accompany a tender rump of meat as it goes into a sizzling hot pan, the seasoned meat seared until it is deeply coloured on all sides but still pink and tender in the centre when Hannibal carves it into portions with his knife.

A sunshine handful of sliced girolles joins the simmering butternut squash in its pan as the music reaches its finale in *pastorale,* Treviso leaves added to cook in the more intense heat until they wilt softly down into the butter and juices gathering at the bottom of the pan. More butter, some chopped parsley and a squeeze of lemon with some salt and pepper: Corelli ends his *Christmas Concerto* with a gentle flourish, *ad libitum,* and Hannibal divides the freshly-prepared food before him into two tupperware containers with that same gentle care. Both go into his thermal travel bag, and a third tub containing a *torta Caprese* that he had baked earlier that morning, before his appointment with Bedelia, joins them in another section of the bag.

Will is obligingly appreciative when Hannibal presents the meal to him at Noble Hills, a pleased little hum reverberating in the back of his throat as soon as he sees - and smells - the still-steaming food as he takes a seat at his table.

“What is it?” He’s a soft thing today, wearing half of the set of navy pyjamas Hannibal had given him for Thanksgiving, pairing the pants with a dark grey turtleneck whose tall collar is rumpled up like a bewildered puppy’s ear.

Hannibal smiles at him indulgently, accepting the jug of sweet mulled cider he had requested from the hospital kitchens from a member of staff and bringing the jug over to join their meal. “Pan-roasted rump of beef with butternut squash, girolles and Treviso.”

“Treviso?” Will inquires - already singling out the unfamiliar brightly-coloured red-purple leaves in his tupperware dish as the culprit, lifting one with the tines of his fork. It’s the same hue as the prominent bruise on his left temple. The bump there has receded somewhat today, but its colours are still vibrant.

“A milder variety of radicchio chicory,” Hannibal explains as he sits down. “It has all the same nutrients as lettuce, but its slightly bitter compounds mean that it is higher in antioxidants.”

Will hums again, swirling the Treviso leaf through a spot of butternut squash purée before bringing it to his mouth to taste. Contemplating the sweet with the bitter on his tongue, between his teeth. He nods. “S’good.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Will prods at a slice of seared meat with his fork. His gaze very deliberately looking down at his food rather than across the table at Hannibal pouring their drinks. “...You should come foraging in Wolf Trap next year. I usually have plenty of chanterelles growing in the wooded areas of my property come summer, early fall. Sometimes pick a few when I’m out walking the dogs to cook with myself.”

Hannibal pushes a mug of the mulled cider over to him, pleased in more ways than one at the unexpected proposal. “That’s a generous offer, Will. If you had a mind to, you could pick the chanterelles for sale. Save consummate chefs like myself from wearily trudging around farmers’ markets looking for a lucky - and experienced - mycological forager.”

Will’s lips quirk upwards in half a grin - perpetually amused, it seems, at the thought of Hannibal having to *trudge.* “You trust me not to poison you?”

“Have you poisoned yourself yet?” Hannibal asks him, truly curious about the answer.

“Nope,” Will says, popping the *p* and then a speared piece of meat into his mouth. Chewing with some relish, his body crying out for the nutrients it needs to keep both himself and his pregnancy strong. “Chanterelles are easy enough to tell apart from the toxic ones. To start with,” he swallows, gesturing vaguely in the air in front of him, “bright orange. Funnel-shaped. They grow in the leaf litter under conifers and oaks rather than on wood, and they smell… sweet, almost. When picked.”

“Like apricots,” Hannibal offers after a sip of his mulled wine. A mild but distinct scent.

Will considers that, echoing Hannibal with a reach for his own mug to sip at. “Yeah, uh, that’s a good way to describe it.” Another swallow, the air sweet with ginger, cinnamon and cloves. “I get a few black trumpets as well. Horns of plenty?”

The species has a darker name. “Trumpets of death,” says Hannibal.

“If you’re going to be a pessimist about the moniker,” Will teases, another grin flickering across his lips as he takes another bite of his meal, the smile growing when Hannibal grins back at him. “They add a nice buttery-smoky flavour to fish.”

“And most other dishes,” Hannibal agrees, taking a bite of his lunch before continuing. “I’d be delighted to take you up on the offer to forage on your land, Will. One can never have enough fresh local produce in one’s larder.”

Hunting together with Will for their next meal would be a delight.

They discuss the new anti-seizure drugs Will has been prescribed after the events of the day before over thick wedges of the torta Hannibal had brought with him for their dessert. More autumnal bounty in one dish: hazelnuts, chocolate, and soft pears that would not last the winter in storage.

Even with a diversifying pool of symptoms, Will’s medical team is - rightfully - wary of extensive polytherapy due to the omega’s pregnancy. The treatment of corticosteroids and IVIG mixed with plasmapheresis is challenging enough to Will’s system, as immunologic alterations during pregnancy increase the susceptibility of the foetal brain to damage. It cannot, however, be ignored that patients treated with immunotherapy gain freedom faster from their symptoms associated with anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis than those who delay immunotherapy or do not receive immunotherapy at all.

Although anti-seizure medication will do nothing for Will’s encephalitis - the seizures are a symptom of the disease rather than an underlying issue or cause -, the seizures *must* be treated with medication in addition to Will’s immunotherapy. Their effects are far too detrimental to both maternal and foetal health and wellbeing. To Will and their developing baby.

“Short-term oral lamotrigine,” Will announces, licking cocoa powder off the tips of his fingers and thumb, a few fudgy crumbs that have escaped down to the inner joints of his knuckles from the torta. “And by ‘short-term’, they mean until at least delivery.” An elbow tapped against his belly.

“It has some side-effects,” Hannibal warns him gently, “especially for those amongst the population with higher amounts of oestrogen in their systems, such as yourself. But I approve. Sodium channel blockers have been shown to have a demonstrably higher efficacy in producing seizure freedom in patients with autoimmune encephalopathies.”

“This where you tell me I’m going to grow a second head or develop a bright green glowing rash?”

“You may develop a rash,” says Hannibal, “but the most common side-effects are mood changes, nausea, dizziness and loss of balance/coordination, drowsiness, insomnia, and vivid dreams and/or nightmares.”

“*...Well,”* Will drawls after a moment to take that all in, his tone so dry Hannibal has to moisten his own lips with another sip of mulled wine even as he hides the curve of them behind his mug, “I would simply *hate* to have to deal with any of *that.*”

“Of course,” Hannibal agrees tranquilly. What are medicinal side effects to the main symptoms one is already suffering? “It is always a pleasure to watch you sit there and dare the cosmos to smite you.” Hannibal moves his legs out of the way under the crowded ward table before Will can kick him in the shin with a particularly vengeful socked foot.

Above the table, Will huffs at him. “I have something to show you.” He amends himself - “Well - uh, actually, I have two things to show you, but I guess they’re sort of the same thing.”

Hannibal remains seated as Will pushes back his chair and stands, making his way slowly over to his bedside cabinet to rummage amongst the contents of its top drawer. He returns to the table when he has found his prize, using one hand on the back of Hannibal’s chair to balance himself as he hands Hannibal a rectangular slip of glossy paper in greyscale. An ultrasound image.

“This is your copy,” says Will. Hovering awkwardly. “It’s from the other day.”

From the ultrasound conducted after Will’s seizure.

The foetus is a good size now in the image: adapting for scale, approximately 30mm long from head to bottom, the size of a small and strangely lumpy apricot. The little one’s head is still far too big for their body, but their face has become something much more recognisable as human. Their jawline shaping up. Tiny eyes are half-closed now in the photograph, and Hannibal can make out the furl of one almost-as-tiny ear beginning to form on the side of the foetus’ half-turned head that the wand had managed to capture. Smudges under the protrusion that is the foetus’ nose are two little nostrils, and the foetus’ mouth is already a sharp and delicate little bow with a pouting lower lip.

“Their development appears to be exactly where it should be,” Hannibal says, tracing the outline of his developing child’s image with the tips of worshipful fingers. That little mouth… a dagger of sweet fire plunged into his chest. His bones are singing with its light, violins trembling into music in the halls of his mind. The beauty of it hurts. “They have your mouth.”

Still hovering overhead, Will makes a noise in the back of his throat - some strange and highly-particular mixture between a chirp and a *hmph.* “Can’t decide if I should be insulted or not.”

“You have a beautiful mouth,” Hannibal says with utmost sincerity, and looks up into Will’s downturned face just as Will goes beautifully pink in response. “I’d hoped they might inherit it.”

Will clears his throat and glances aside. “...I was talking with Dr. Morgan-Moore earlier. I’m going to take the NIPT blood test this week, screen for any chromosomal disorders.”

“It will also tell you the child’s primary and secondary biological sex and gender.”

“I thought-" Will licks his lips with the slip of a tongue, swaying forwards just enough Hannibal can feel the heat of his forearm between his own shoulder blades, “about keeping

that a surprise. Until the big day."

"You don't want to know?"

"It doesn't matter to me either way." Will shifts, sways again - and steadies when Hannibal turns in his seat, spreading a supportive hand over his hip. A harbour during stormy seas. "I can give you the results, if you'd like to know."

"It can be a happy surprise for both of us," Hannibal offers. Whether their child is male, female, intersex or nonbinary, alpha, beta, omega or other… none of that matters to him. The child will be *his*.

"We can also do the NIPP test at the same time," says Will, "to confirm paternity for your legal team. They'll need a cheek swab for your DNA, uh. Thursday, maybe?"

Hannibal squeezes his hip reassuringly. "Just let me know when." A cheek swab is nothing, provided he moderate his choice of meals beforehand. "What was the second thing you wished to show me?"

"Oh! Uh -" Will steps back, and Hannibal misses the heat of him under his hands immediately.

"Will?"

Will lifts the hem of his sweater, rucking up the fabric to under his armpits. Exposing the clammy flesh of his lower torso, the twin darker patches of his areolae peeking out from beneath the turtleneck's wool.

Hannibal tilts his head, a little perplexed by the action. It serves no immediate purpose that he can see, and Will seems embarrassed to have done it at all - growing *more* embarrassed the longer Hannibal looks at him without comment, flustered red spreading up his throat and to the tips of his ears.

Mild confusion remains until Will turns on the spot, offering Hannibal his side-profile. "It might be more obvious this way -"

"You're showing."

Will has a baby bump. It's small: the convex curve to Will's abdomen is still only a slight one, something Will could conceivably pass off as bloating and easily hide under a sweater, but pronounced enough that Hannibal cannot fail to see it after having his attention directed there. Physical - *visible* - proof of the changes happening to Will's body, of the tiny life growing inside of the omega.

Hannibal is standing even before he fully registers the impulse to stand, Will - startled - chirping even as one of Hannibal's hands settles over Will's abdomen, Hannibal's other arm wrapping around Will to support Will's back.

It's too soon for Hannibal to feel the foetus kick. Far too soon. The foetus will be making small, jerky movements now that could be seen on a lucky scan, tiny limbs powered by an

even tinier heart furiously beating away at 180 beats per minute, but even Will shouldn't be able to feel them yet.

Something aches in Hannibal's throat, a subvocal quivering like the string of an instrument from the chthonic deeps. He has the world beneath the palm of his hand. A supernova. The *universe*. And, unlike the cold and frozen far reaches of time and space, it's *warm.*

"...Hannibal," Will says, flustered and unable, it seems, to think of anything else to say. His own fingers curl into the weave of Hannibal's sweater, a reflexive touch. And soothing, grounding, as Hannibal lowers his face to rub his cheek against the crown of Will's head, down over the unbruised side of Will's face.

Will, hesitantly, lifts his chin to be able to better rub his cheek back against Hannibal's in turn. A mutual scent-marking, bittersweet bergamot and cloves, vanilla and smoke.

"It's- uh- it's still discreet enough to get hidden under a sweater or shirt, and I don't *think* my scent has changed too obviously yet, but. I thought you ought to know."

"Thank you for sharing it with me," Hannibal says, pressing his lips to the side of Will's head even as the wool of Will's sweater droops around his wrist, falling down with only one of Will's hands still holding the hem. His thumb still running back and forwards over the skin beneath, over that slight but precious curve to Will's abdomen. "It won't be long now before this one announces themselves to the world. Have you thought about how you wish the news to be broken to others?"

Will swallows; Hannibal hears the click in his throat. "I'm. Trying not to think about that right now. I've got a lot to think about."

"That you do," Hannibal murmurs, and gives one last full-handed caress to Will's belly before removing his hand from under Will's turtleneck. Time is running out, but Will can have the time he has left the way he wants it. (The way Hannibal is, for now, content to let him have it.) "Our little secret will keep for a little longer."

Some secrets are less happy to be kept than others. Donald Sutcliffe finds Hannibal before Hannibal has managed to leave the floor of the hospital that Will's ward is on, catching up with Hannibal barely a few metres away from the elevator in a sudden rush of spoiling figs and clary sage.

"Hannibal! Just the man I was hoping to see." Donald's smile is wide and genial, his teeth as white as his coat: the expression of one who believes his conscience to be clean. That does not realise it could be cleaner yet if only its owner had their head dunked repeatedly into a bath of pure carbolic acid. "One of the nurses told me you were in early today."

"Yes," Hannibal says briskly. And without Donald's enthusiasm. "Such a pity we couldn't talk yesterday." When Donald *should* have been on-call to attend to Will in the aftermath of his seizure.

Donald's face twitches - not quite a grimace, not quite a wince -, his pleased smile straining at the edges as one of his upper fangs digs into the flesh of his lower lip. "I'm sure you

remember how it is on the blood-and-guts side of things. Lots of demands on one's time." Bluster.

Hannibal smiles thinly in response. "I recall, yes." Ever more pointedly: "Our patients are our priority."

"Of course, of course." Donald swiftly changes the subject, his weight rocking back on his heels into a more confident stance - and lifting his chin, showing off the vulnerable, and supposedly enticing, line of his throat. "I wonder, are you free later? I won tickets in a charity raffle for dinner at a new restaurant that opened in the Inner Harbour a few months back. Stellar reviews. Thought I might book us a table for tonight."

Hannibal would rather endure listening to the very dullest of his patients in back-to-back appointments until dawn. "I'm afraid I'm busy tonight."

"Perhaps sometime this week instead?"

"Alas," says Hannibal without an ounce of sincerity - or attempt to portray it -, "seasonal preparations and my own patient load will be keeping me quite occupied for some time. The holidays can be a fraught time for many as I'm sure you're aware, especially when it comes to mental health."

Hearing the casual dismissal in Hannibal's words - and understanding what *else* it means -, Donald's unrestrained scent sours like overripe fruit rotting in wet loam. The pleasure seeps out of his eyes, his expression turning into a false thing. Brittle, and petty as his tone: "It's good of you to take time out of your terribly busy schedule to keep an eye on Mstr. Graham, Hannibal. And his pregnancy. You hover in these halls so much, we might as well call you Baltimore's most premature helicopter parent."

Hannibal refuses to rise to the jab. "As always, I try to act in Will's best interests. And our child's."

Donald nods at him, bland as ever. Rocks back and forward slightly on his feet again. "I hesitate to ask this, Hannibal," he begins, his body language spelling out quite clearly that *no, he does not,* "but have you had a paternity test done?"

"You're questioning if I'm the father?" Hannibal asks, the last pretences of his smile dropping away entirely as his voice turns as cold as the currently clear blue winter sky.

With all the preservation instincts of a swine glutting itself on a bucket full of rotting fruit even as the distraction leads it towards the slaughterhouse, Donald *persists*. "Would hate to see you sold a pig in a poke."

"So it's Will's character that you're questioning," Hannibal deduces bluntly, letting Donald wriggle out in the open without doublespeak to hide behind for several long, weighted moments. "I trust Will implicitly, Donald. And I *do* recall being there for the conception. In vivid detail, and with great fondness."

Donald's lip curls, his fangs glinting with a great deal less friendliness than before. "Mstr. Graham had a discussion with me about the history of his reproductive health for the purposes of my study. Are you aware that he first presented as an omega at a bitching party?" With vengeful relish: "I believe they call them *slick n' slides* in some of the Southern states."

Bitching party, slick n' slide, gangbang… the type of event Donald is referring to has a million lewd, derogatory names in every language, in every time, in every country the world over. Hosted primarily by alphas, *for* alphas - or those presumed will present as alpha -, the parties are an orgy of taboo and decadent sexual indulgence, with a swarm of alphas descending on the guest or guests of honour: usually non-male non-alphas who 'need to be fucked back into their place.' Very frequently, without those individuals' consent.

The combination of marathon sex and sustained stress and fear can occasionally force individuals into an early or - much more rarely - utterly aberrant/mature presentation of their dynamic. Unpresented adolescents in the midst of puberty are the most susceptible, but the efficacy - and cruelty - of 'bitching' has been documented in many cases of betas presenting as omegas well into their 30s, and more than a few female alphas switching to another dynamic as well due to very particular circumstances and severe trauma.

Omegas are usually the prime victim of bitching parties, or youths suspected of being late-blooming unpresented omegas. Betas. Female alphas, perceived as 'lesser' by the most contemptible of male alphas. Males in general are preferred, because if it turns out they're not omegas and really *are* betas, the chances of accidental pregnancy (and successfully proven allegations of rape) are greatly reduced.

For Will to have presented at one of these parties…

Hannibal files the thought away with clinical efficiency to examine later, turning his wrist at his side to remind himself of the absence of the scalpel he would usually, had he been in his office, keep up his sleeve. "Donald, have you considered seeking the assistance of a psychiatrist in overcoming your internalised sexism rather than resorting to using HIPAA violations in a petty attempt to score points in some nonexistent contest?"

Ever prideful, Donald refuses the out. He bristles. "And endure more of your brand of mind games? I'll stick with physical therapy."

"As you wish," says Hannibal. Blood and guts it is.

Hannibal leaves Donald to his pettish snit and departs the hospital, driving straight from Noble Hills to his private leisure club. With all the upheaval currently in his life he has been somewhat neglecting his usual exercise routines, and 100 laps in the Olympic-sized swimming pool at the club will go some way to rectifying that. Give him time to cycle through his thoughts and plans for the coming weeks even as his arms propel him through the chlorinated water.

Wild duck served with roasted grapes and radicchio - or perhaps spiced roast goose? Dried orange slices still waiting to be hung on a tree. A diamond-and-platinum serpent, its fangs kissing endless blue. Partridge served with pears, just to make Will grin. Tickets and reservations merely biding their time.

“Good day for it,” a fellow patron of the club says to Hannibal as Hannibal pauses for a breath between laps at the side of the pool. Another beta, his comment offhand and inane, but well-meant.

“It is,” Hannibal agrees. It is.

The lamotrigine makes Will incredibly drowsy - and, irritatingly, renders him almost wholly unable to actually *sleep.* Monday night finds him dealing with both by curling up in a pile of blankets on the sofa in his ward, watching terrible Hallmark Christmas movies and dozily sipping whatever hot drink Tancred brings him to see him through the wee hours.

The nurse joins him on the sofa at several points for long periods: long enough to sit through almost the entirety of *Mistletoe Mates,* returning again halfway through *Jingle Belles.* Spaced out entirely, Will has no idea if his film commentary to the other man counts as intelligible speech, but he finally passes out at some point and stirs, later, with the sun filtering into the ward and layers of blankets tucked diligently up to his chin.

Will sits up and stretches at the sight of Tancred with his breakfast tray, regretting, when his neck gives a familiar *twinge*, falling asleep on the couch once again. “Did I miss the ending of *The Courting Carol*?”

“They all lived happily ever after,” Tancred tells him as he places the tray on Will’s lap. Clicking his tongue reprovingly when Will reaches immediately for the chunks of cubed mango rather than the gently steaming cheese omelette sitting on its plate. “And all three of them were tone deaf. Eat your omelette while it’s hot.”

Will spends the rest of his morning answering a few texts from Beverly and reading (or trying to read when all of the words swim on the page). Hannibal joins him at lunchtime, much more pensive than the day before and blaming his temperament on dealing with 50% more patients than he would usually see on a Tuesday. Something about people’s schedules changing around parties and other events for the holidays.

It makes a nice change to see Hannibal in the middle of the day rather than at the end of it. A midday boost to morale - and a relief to Will’s guilt at always hogging Hannibal’s evenings. At the end of his long day Hannibal will be able to go home from his office and *stay* home. And hopefully get some sleep.

When Hannibal approaches him, Will reaches up to cup the other man’s face, thumbing away the blue streaks of shadows beginning to make a nest for themselves under Hannibal’s eyes. *Look at these.*

Hannibal only sighs at him as he leans into the touch - and then further into Will, sweeping Will into a loose hold as he leans down and buries his face in Will's neck. Breathing. Audibly. Taking Will's scent deep into his lungs, one of his hands grasping firmly at the sweater covering the small of Will's back.

Will is both embarrassed and amused. His fingers sift into the fine hair at the back of Hannibal's scalp regardless, petting aimlessly through the gold-and-silvering strands where Hannibal's hair gel is least applied. "Did you come here just to smell me?"

"...Very possibly," Hannibal admits. And rubs their cheeks together again when he raises his head enough to do so, leaving traces of his oils on Will's skin, the dry spice of his cologne.

…He's really making no attempt to hide it any more, is he?

They sit down together to eat the lamb kofta kebabs Hannibal has brought them for lunch - on the *sofa,* scandalously, after Will mentions his tiredness, the restless night before. Will sips at some weird floral tea as he chows his way through the grilled meat and its accompanying spicy salad wrap scattered with crushed pistachios, grumbling through a full mouth as the TV in front of him switches from inane Christmas adverts to the - somehow - more annoying news.

Jack Crawford is renewing his celebrity status. The press is tearing into him about *another* family killing discovered by the FBI that morning - the topic of Beverly's texts to Will - as well as the Ripper kills in the church and the Pagoda. If the latter two even *are* Ripper kills. Just how many serial killers are there currently at large in the United States? Shouldn't the FBI be *doing* something? Will innocent families be safe to celebrate the holidays with such fear hanging over their heads?

Will grimaces as he swallows another mouthful of his wrap and reaches for his tea, muttering a dark, "It *is* the Ripper," into his mug. "Just like the *Pagoda* was the damn Ripper."

The hum that sounds, neutral, in Hannibal's throat in answer is something much more benign. "A theory is a good theory if it satisfies two requirements. It must accurately describe a large class of observations on the basis of a model that contains only a few arbitrary elements, and it must make definite predictions about the results of future observations."

Will scowls at him. "You doubt me now as well?"

"I believe that your theory that the scenes found in Patterson Park and Bolton Hill are the Ripper's works to be a sound one," says Hannibal, "but public pressure and intense scrutiny means that Jack is obliged to entertain other theories as being plausible, even if he agrees that yours is the most likely." Pausing before adding, delicately, "Especially since the one offering him the most likely theory is currently on medical leave with an inflamed brain."

Will huffs, unimpressed. Hannibal kisses his forehead goodbye before he leaves, right in the middle of the scrunch in Will's brow.

The afternoon is less pleasant. Sutcliffe has Will doing endless tests to check his depth-perception and spatial awareness, and is in a particularly foul mood throughout all of it. The

sound of Jackson 5 drifting in from the stereo at the nurses' desk, gleefully singing about how *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town*, does nothing to sweeten Sutcliffe's temper - nor does having the chattering nurse, Carla, as his assistant.

Carla, oblivious to all the errands Sutcliffe tries to give her to get her to leave the room, maintains a non-stop flow of words in every millisecond of dead air, enthusing about the positive effects treatment seems to be having on Will, about how much pregnancy agrees with Will now the medications seem to be working. Look at Will; he's *glowing.*

Will, normally worn thin by such blind, indelicate, unending extroversion, deals with his own discomfort and indulges Carla simply because her words are *visibly* pissing Sutcliffe off. Will can suffer anything out of spite if he feels motivated enough, and even petty omega one-upmanship with a side of preening isn't too far beneath him.

Sutcliffe agrees with Carla that Will's improvement is encouraging - even with the sleep-related side-effects from the lamotrigine -, but his smile, when he talks, is flat behind the eyes.

He sees you when you're sleeping,

He knows when you're awake,

With Carla as witness, Will tentatively broaches the topic of his hallucinations. The melting walls and flesh. People and things looking like… other things. Not themselves. Will the lamotrigine affect (*help with*) that?

Carla at last falls silent, sensing the seriousness of the conversation.

Sutcliffe frowns at him before grabbing a notepad. Displeased that Will has avoided mentioning the hallucinations for so long - probably not for Will's own sake, but for the details of Donald's study. "When would you say these hallucinations began?"

Will worries at his lower lip with his teeth for a few moments, trying to think back. Aware of how pathetic his reply sounds when he says, finally, "...I can't really say when they started. I just slowly became aware that I might not be dreaming."

Sutcliffe scribbles a few notes. Lets Will wait for a few long minutes on tenterhooks, before: "We may have to alter your medication."

He knows if you've been bad or good,

So be good for goodness sake!

"Again?" Will asks. Unhappy with the declaration. All the changes to his medication are playing havoc with his system, and the constant changing side-effects leave him feeling as unstable as Alana had pronounced him to be. Unable to tell what he will feel like in his own skin from one day to the next.

Sutcliffe seems to take some sadistic pleasure from seeing Will put out, and Will has to bite his tongue before he passes comment on the doctor's terrible *bedside manner.* "As your

illness, symptoms and needs change and develop, Mstr. Graham, so too must our treatment of them."

There is nothing Will can sensibly do but - with an internal note to talk to the other members of his medical team - concede the point. If his medication needs to be changed to better treat him, his medication needs to be changed. (Hannibal would probably mention if he saw anything questionable in Will's treatment plan anyway, because Hannibal wouldn't be able to help himself.)

Late evening brings an extremely tired Beverly and dinner from a hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese place that her neighbour had recommended she try. Two to-go bowls and pairs of disposable chopsticks deposited on Will's dining table with a rueful *voila.*

"The plan was for *phở*," Beverly confesses as Will takes his seat, "but the auntie behind the counter got it out of me that I was visiting a pregnant friend in hospital and suddenly I was being offered an off-menu exclusive that she keeps for her favourite customers."

"Sounds like a grift," says Will, amused.

"I *know,*" Beverly moans, "but she was gone before I could argue and it smelled *so good.*" A hand gestured to the bowls: "*Bún riêu cua.* It's this rice noodle soup with tomatoes and crab meat paste."

Will cracks open the lid of his to-go bowl, taking an appreciative sniff of the rising - and strangely, enticingly pungent - steam. "...I see how you got conned."

"Not a con if it tastes good," Beverly gripes back at him, opening her own bowl. "Probably."

It tastes good, both meat and broth sweet and sour and spicy all at once. Will digs in with his disposable chopsticks, and Beverly's eyes bloom a bigger and brighter ring of pleased red than usual.

She's in pre-rut: has been for some time. Will can smell it on her; the pink pepper notes of her scent are stronger than they usually are, and the blockers she must've used on herself earlier in the day are the heavy duty, very chemical-ly kind, piney and astringent on the nose even under the faint smell of the morgue that always clings to the skin after a workday amongst the dead. Beverly's appearance, too, is particularly on-point that evening, her eyeliner sharp and her hair braided back and kept in place with a claw. Her shirt is clingier than the kind she seems to usually prefer, and the small golden hoops in her ears gleam in the light.

Will slurps down his noodles and politely doesn't mention it.

"All the aunties say you should eat carp," says Beverly between mouthfuls of her own. Doesn't mention - but doesn't stop her eyes from flicking to - the bright splash of bruising across the side of Will's head, its colours as vibrant as rainbows trapped in an oil spill. "Fish. Seafood. Apparently it gives you smart babies."

Will swallows, letting his chopsticks rest on the lip of his bowl. "Explaining the crab meat paste?"

“Explaining the crab meat paste.” Beverly pokes around in her bowl, swirling its contents until a wedge of bright green lime rises to the surface. “Think there’s shrimp in here too.”

Will smiles ruefully, his hand falling instinctively to his abdomen and the tiny life growing within it. “I think the *smart* part has been covered with Hannibal’s contribution to this one’s DNA.”

“Don’t you dare sit there and deny your scrabble skills in front of me, Will Graham. Not after kicking my ass the other week.” Beverly props her chin up with her free hand, musing: “Between the two of you, your baby’s probably gonna be a scary evil genius or invent world peace or something.”

“Always great to have the two extremes of the scale laid out for you.”

“I said *or something,*” Beverly gripes. “Even *after* you knocked out a few brain cells with that dent to your noggin on Sunday.” She points her chopsticks at Will threateningly. *“Don’t* do that again.”

As an apology, Wills shows her his latest ultrasound photo after they’ve finished eating. Will is less than impressed when, without prompting, Beverly echoes Hannibal by announcing that the blob looks like Will - and laughing at Will’s expression.

“You have the same *sulk*, Graham. You really can’t see it?” Beverly pulls the ultrasound image away from Will before he can snatch it back from her, turning the picture sideways and upside-down in her hands to look at it from all angles. (Will isn’t sure why she bothers; the picture doesn’t look any less weird whichever way one holds it.) “Think I remember reading somewhere that the digestive system is one of the first things that gets developed *in utero.* But bottoms up.”

Dryly, Will inquires, “...We all begin life as assholes?”

Beverly grins, “And some of us never grow out of it,” waiting for Will’s answering huff of laughter before she shifts focus. “I know it’s early days, but have you thought of names?”

“Names?” Will baulks.

“You planning on calling them *oi you* all their lives?”

“I’ve just been calling them the alien tadpole.”

Beverly cackles before sliding the ultrasound back across the table to Will. Energised by their meal and conversation, she smells like melting amber and bright, vibrant pink pepper. “No harm in coming up with some alternatives. At least before Dr. Lecter suggests *Scipio.*”

Will gives her a dead stare: *you think you’re funny.* Beverly is unrepentant: she does, she does.

Will looks at the ultrasound again himself, trying to see what Hannibal and Beverly had seen. Once more letting the strange reality wash over him that this *thing,* this one day baby, his

child, is actually growing inside of him. Right now. Another being in his bones, inside of him, whilst Will's mind floats outside of himself.

"...I think Hannibal is in love with me."

A long pause, and then Beverly, carefully, asks, "Yeah?" Neutral. Another beat: "How do you feel about that?"

"I feel…" Will turns the ultrasound image around again. Upside-down. And then facedown on the table, only able to deal with one overwhelming idea at a time. "Confused. We agreed on something casual. Friends-with-benefits."

"Sometimes the benefit is the feelings you find along the way," says Beverly. More hesitantly - "Romantic feelings?"

"Yeah." Will closes his eyes. Studies the thought on the back of his lids, remembering the feeling of Hannibal's face at his throat earlier in the day, Hannibal's lips on his forehead. "Uh- maybe. Not sure if he's - we're? - getting wires crossed. Platonic affection for each other, and paternal love for." Hand on the white back of the ultrasound, fingers tapping once. "This."

Beverly *hmm*s a long and thoughtful *hmm.* Stretches out her legs to the side, pointing her toes in their boots. "Could be. Could've developed out of that into something more too. Could be this *and* that."

"Complicated," Will surmises, and Beverly nods. "Trying to, uh, figure out. What my thoughts are about it all."

"Sucks to be you," says Beverly. Not unsympathetic, but light. Optimistic. "But *maybe*'s something. Maybe *maybe* is something you might be feeling too, if you're confused about what you feel about it?"

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Hannibal is Will's friend. Hannibal improves Will's day just by being *in* it (even when he's being a pretentious ass). They get along well, the two of them; they've exhibited care for each other, and they're both intellectually and sexually stimulated by one another. For only being a *friend* with benefits, a beta fuckbuddy, Hannibal has already made Will's heart turn wildly over in his chest.

Will isn't *blind.*

Will opens his eyes - and Beverly has already seen the realisation on his face, *far* too smug about it when he opens his mouth. "...Damn."

Beverly grins back at him. "Give it some more thinking time, then talk to Dr. Lecter. Only way you're ever gonna work anything out." She reaches across the table to pat the back of his hand consolingly. "For my 2 cents, I think it's mutual. You both just really seem to *click* together. In the good way. Peanut butter and jelly."

“Green eggs and ham?”

“Nothing wrong with being an acquired taste,” says Beverly. Then, “You should make him court you properly. The *posh* way: the full 12 steps,” she gestures expansively at nothing and everything, “the whole tralala.”

Will wrinkles his nose at her and takes back his hand. He’s hardly Baltimore’s most eligible debutant, and courting customs differ from country to country, social group to social group. “He’s from Europe.”

“You don’t think there are posh people in *Europe?”*

The only omegas Will knows of that were courted using all of the traditional 12 steps were from families with *old money,* both American and abroad. “He’s not a member of the Royal Family.”

“How do *you* know? There’s more than one set of royals in Europe.” Beverly sniffs. “Your evil genius spawn could inherit a principality.”

“What happened to the *or something*?”

Beverly shrugs - and then has to use her hand to smother a yawn. She’s had a busy day; her text message about going off to the scene of another family killing had been an early one, and Jack getting chewed out on TV will hardly have done the BAU team any favours. *Especially* whilst still processing the Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church tableau.

So, in the spirit of friendship and reciprocity, Will ventures an awkward, but not unsympathetic: “Rough day?”

“Very,” says Beverly. Sighs. “Lotta work. The family killing… When we got to the residence, they were all dead around their Christmas tree. Still had carols playing on the stereo.”

The harsh dichotomy between death and seasonal cheer. Beverly is being - deliberately - sparing with the details, trying not to relive her day again.

“How did you find them?” Will asks.

“We got a lot of evidence from the Turner house. Handprints on the furniture, video game controllers. Soda cans everywhere.”

“Sounds like the bedroom of a stereotypical teenage boy.”

“Yeah,” Beverly says - upset about it. “I isolated seven pairs of shoe prints at the scene. Filtering out the Turners, including Jesse Turner’s, gave us three unsubs: sneakers size 7, 3-and-a-half, and a boy’s 11.”

“So Jesse definitely brought friends home with him.”

“Zeller called them the Lost Boys, ” says Beverly. Boys doing all the things they shouldn’t do in Never-Neverland. “They stayed in the Turner’s house for a week after the family was dead.

We've got receipts for pizza and pay-per-view movies during that time. A lot of porn."

"Very little taboo about sex when you've just committed murder." Setting up a camp of indulgence next to four rotting bodies at that.

Beverly's face twists, the vanilla edges of her scent bittering into something burnt. Alpha pheromones heavier in the room around Will and her: protective. "Jimmy found a match on one of the fingerprints. Another missing kid: Connor Frist, a 13 year-old from Huntsville. He vanished 10 months ago, and the case was never solved."

So the team had followed the lead to Huntsville in the vain hope the Frists might still be alive.

"We went to the Frists' home, but it was too late. By at least a week. The bodies…" Beverly shakes her head, a few strands of her dark hair escaping the braid keeping them in place and swaying against her cheeks. "The family dog had been trapped in the house with no food all that time."

Starving. Doing what comes naturally to all starving creatures: anything to survive. "The dog isn't to blame."

"I don't blame the dog," Beverly insists. "I feel *awful* about the dog. Poor thing got water out of the toilet bowl, but he had to eat." A pause. Telling. "The Frists' extended family had to formally identify the bodies, and they saw-" Beverly gestures to her shoulder. "They didn't-*don't* want the dog after seeing that."

Behaviour observed at Body Farms suggests that animal scavengers highly prefer to consume the soft tissue of the shoulder and arm in human corpses. Sometimes detaching a limb - or part of one - by chewing down to the joint and bone.

"What'll happen to him?" Will asks. A bleeding heart for canines in need, always.

"We sent him to a proper groomer's after processing to get cleaned, get the smell of decomposition out of his fur, and one of the lab techs offered to give him a home." Beverly catches Will's look, offering more detail: "Sharon. She also handles hair and fibres. She's been looking for a family dog to adopt for some time, apparently. Two kids with her husband at home, and they've been asking for a pet."

Will thinks he vaguely remembers a Sharon in the labs. A blonde beta with a kind smile and a penchant for forgetting to return her collection of used coffee cups to the break room when she's hard at work.

It's a relief to hear that the dog is going to a trusted home. To another family with kids, at that. One who can handle the squeamish parts of the animal's history.

"At least something good, however small, can come out of the whole mess," Will says. A sad comfort: at least the boys hadn't shot the dog.

“Yeah,” Beverly quietly agrees. It would’ve been better for Connor Frist’s parents and siblings to still be alive and have their son and brother safe at home with them, but at least the boys hadn’t shot the dog.

Chapter End Notes

Bouillabaisse: (from Occitan *bolhabaissa,* possibly a compound of *bolhir,* ‘to boil’, + *abaissar,* ‘to lower [temperature]’, equivalent to French *bouillir* + *abaisser*) a Provençal fish soup from Marseille. Initially created in the 18th century by local fishermen to cook their leftover produce, the Marseillaise dish became a popular classic. To maintain its authenticity and differentiate it from other fish stews, a bouillabaisse charter was drawn up in 1980 to standardise its preparation. The soup must contain the bony rockfish *rascasse* (a red scorpion fish), which gives the dish its distinctive taste (and high price). European conger eel, sea robin fish, mussels, crabs, lobster and squid are also often added. The soup is made with tomato, onion, garlic, and Provençal herbs, as well as orange zest, saffron and fennel.
The ‘correct’ way to eat bouillabaisse is in two courses: first, the rich tomato broth with toasted bread spread with rouille sauce (a mayonnaise-like sauce of olive oil, egg, bread crumbs, garlic and herbs) either dunked into or floated on the soup, and, second, the serving of seafood spooned into the same bowl. Many diners are just as happy to combine the two.

Things that will never fail to confuse me: 1) in North America, *cider* is a non-alcoholic beverage, and 2) France - and classically trained chefs - differ from the rest of the world in which species of mushroom they refer to as a *girolle* and which is a *chanterelle*.

Sharon is a character from the novel *Red Dragon*. She’s one of Beverly’s staff/assistants in the novel and works in the Hair and Fibres section.

“He is not to them what he is to me," I thought: "he is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine- I am sure he is- I feel akin to him- [...] *I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him.”* - Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*
“I AM THAT I AM.” - (also commonly written “I AM WHO I AM” in English) *The Holy Bible, Exodus* 3:14
A theory is a good theory if it satisfies two requirements. It must accurately describe a large class of observations on the basis of a model that contains only a few arbitrary elements, and it must make definite predictions about the results of future observations. - Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*

Arcangelo Corelli’s *Concerto grosso in G minor, Op.6, No.8* was published posthumously in 1714. It gained its name as the *Christmas Concerto* due to an inscription on the title page reading ‘Fatto per la notte di Natale (made for the night of Christmas)’.

Pan-roasted rump of beef with butternut squash, girolles and Treviso
Pear and hazelnut torta Caprese
Grilled lamb kofta kebabs with pistachios and spicy salad wrap
Bún riêu cua

I'm sorry for the long (long) wait for this chapter. I've been through the wringer this year with poor health and family (and poor health in the family), and time/motivation/ability for fic were just not with me. Some things are looking up now and some things are still being investigated, but I'm currently in a pretty good space right now. Thank you all for your kindness and your patience whilst you've been waiting!

crépinette

Chapter Summary

Hannibal assists with a case, and Alana has some things to say.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's early in the day but the creaking elevator that Hannibal rides down to the labs at Quantico is already ripe with the mixed scents of tired people, cheap breakfast burritos and burnt coffee. A hint of the vanillic scent of paperwork, a touch of the clinging smell of chilled, decomposing flesh, and a little frosty flash of menthol vapour rub that, doubtless, more than a few of the Quantico staff have smeared under their noses before descending to the same level in this building as the morgue.

The junior agent that has been assigned the job of escorting Hannibal from the reception desk where he signed in and down to the labs seems to be occupied more with her own nerves than the offputting smell in the little box she has trapped herself and her charge in. Dr. Lecter, she is very obviously, very terribly, aware, is BAU Chief Jack Crawford's guest at Quantico today, and no junior agent with dreams of advancing far in the Quantico branch wants to run the risk of disappointing - or worse, *angering* - good ol' Jack.

"I do hope this elevator is serviced regularly," says Hannibal, pleasantly, a few seconds after said elevator carriage has let out a rather disgruntled *clunk* around them. He had rearranged one of his patients' appointments that day to free up some extra time in his morning when Jack had called (at a barely acceptable hour) and asked him for this favour, and getting trapped in this small, malodorous metal box whilst mechanics on a measly government paycheque attempt to fix the broken elevator system would grievously throw off his adjusted itinerary.

The junior agent looks as though she may curl up into a ball and cringe, embarrassed on behalf of the FBI. "The system receives regular maintenance, sir," she says. Realises her mistake and hastily amends - "Doctor. No-one wants to be stuck in here during the transport of sensitive evidence."

She means *dead bodies.* During the transport of corpses due to be stored in the morgue below.

"Sounds like an unpleasant experience," Hannibal agrees, and is glad on behalf of his nose when they finally reach their floor and the elevator's doors slide open. The air hardly smells much better on the lab level, but at least there is better air circulation out in the - relative - open.

The junior agent is relieved both in spirit and of her duty with Hannibal delivered to his destination, pointing Hannibal, before she disappears back into the elevator once more, to one lab in particular with an apologetic, “I’m not sure when Agent Crawford will be down to speak with you, but I was instructed to leave you in his team’s capable hands until then.”

Capable. Hannibal can hear the bickering emanating from the lab he had been directed towards from halfway down the nearby corridor. Two masculine voices, a constant patter back and forth, the morgue-scent of chemicals and dead chilled flesh increasing at the same pace as the volume of dialogue as Hannibal approaches the source of both.

One voice, deeper and exasperated: “The body *still* doesn’t look right. How can it still not look right?!”

Another voice, mellow and blithely unhelpful: “Is this aside from the part where it’s DIY build-a-dead-body?”

Withering silence.

“Take a deep breath -”

“Over a *corpse?* ”

“And have another look.”

Hannibal adjusts the lay of the visitor’s badge reception had given him in its place clipped to his breast pocket and then steps into the lab. A silent and unnoticed observer - for now. The numerous dead, currently draped with sheets and occupying all of the room’s mortuary tables, will hardly be disturbed from their slumber by Hannibal’s light tread, and the two men, deeper into the morgue area of the room, are too focused on each other and the occupied mortuary drawer pulled out between them to notice the newest guest in their midst.

The taller, younger-looking and darker-haired of the pair is the frustrated one, gesticulating wildly with one gloved hand in nitrile blue. “I’ve gone over this guy at *least* a hundred times.”

“That’s what happens when you don’t read the assembly instructions,” his companion drolly informs him, his back to Hannibal but his attitude still quite apparent: wholly unbothered by the tic twitching away in the other man’s brow. “You know,” sing-song, and *horrendously* off-key, “*the leg bone’s connected to the- knee bone. The knee bone’s connected to-”*

“The completely missing thigh bone?”

“That’s the spirit!” says the obviously most optimistic man of the two in the morgue, reaching over the dead body and wide gulf of sarcasm between them to pat his sighing colleague on the arm.

Now with some inkling of the exact body the members of Jack’s team are currently examining, Hannibal approaches. Allowing the tip of one of his shoes to make contact with a

leg on one of the mortuary tables as he passes, the quiet sound of leather against steel announcing his presence to the other, still breathing, members of the room.

The man with his back to Hannibal notices first, turning and immediately smiling in welcome even as his eyes do a shrewd flick from Hannibal's face to his visitor's badge to the cut of his suit. (More astute an individual, then, than the bickering had made him sound, but any threat he poses is definitely psychological rather than physical in nature.)

"You must be Dr. Lecter," he says. Hannibal inclines head - *the one and only* - and his greeter sticks out a - bare - hand for Hannibal to clasp after Hannibal shifts the briefcase in his grasp from right hand to left. Grip firm and friendly. "I'm Jimmy Price, one of the long-suffering denizens of the department." A sideways nod in the direction of his dark-haired colleague on the other side of the mortuary drawer. "This is Brian."

"Zeller," says the other man, extending a hand to Hannibal as well - before remembering himself when he catches sight of his own fingers hand gloved-up in sanitary nitrile. The hand is withdrawn again hastily, snatched back to Zeller's chest. "Uh - sorry. Cross-contamination."

"A pleasure to meet you both," says Hannibal, and means it quite sincerely. It's interesting to see the workings of the FBI from the inside-out, and to meet more of Jack Crawford's team, the people that Will spends so much time with.

The crow's feet at the corners of Price's eyes deepen as he smiles again, and his scent - freshly smothered, Hannibal notes, with mid-tier synthetic blockers - sweetens slightly with a breath of honeysuckle. Omega pheromones. "Oh, you're *charming.*" He must be around Hannibal's age or older, sandy and silver-haired, trim for his age and with a solid jawline that suggests a devil-may-care obstinate streak. "Nobody *ever* says it's a pleasure to meet us." Or good-natured mischief.

Zeller has a drier response. "Especially not in front of a dead body."

"Or Zee," says Price, and shakes his head mournfully at Zeller's answering *hmph*. To Hannibal: "We're still waiting for everyone else, I'm afraid."

"Thought we'd get some other work done in the meantime." Zeller jerks his chin down at the body in front of him - before hesitating, hand on the outside of the drawer. "But if it's a disturbance, I can put him away for now…?"

The dead are not the most disturbing people in the morgue.

"I'm happy to wait," says Hannibal, and sets down his briefcase away from all nearby corpses.

"That's good." Price gives an approving nod. "Strong stomach." He gasps. "But where are my manners? Dr. Lecter, let me introduce you to one Mr. Jack Landry, the latest alleged victim-"

"Likely victim." Zeller.

Price gives him a pointed look, stepping to the side and gesturing theatrically to the body laying out and exposed on the open mortuary drawer. Or - *parts* of a body. “Latest likely but still *alleged* victim of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

A neatly-assembled jigsaw puzzle of a large, dead black alpha man lays in the drawer, the victim’s body separated limb from limb from torso and then segmented even further. All of the pieces appear to be in different stages of decomposition, suggesting their removal from the living body at different times and/or that the pieces were stored in different locations prior to their retrieval by the FBI, and all of the pieces that the FBI have managed to retrieve have been… *reassembled* so that, in death, they lie approximately where Mr. Jack Landry would have had them in life.

“This would be the victim from the church in Bolton Hill that’s been in the news lately?” Hannibal asks.

Price nods. “That’s the one.”

“It appears not all of Mr. Landry made it to the party.” There are pieces of the body missing. Numerous and quite conspicuous pieces.

“Thus our conundrum. Zeller here thinks some of Mr. Landry’s pieces got mixed-up during transport.”

Hannibal leans over the mortuary drawer to reexamine the victim more closely. There *does* seem to be something a little odd about how Mr. Landry’s pieces have been reassembled… *Ah.*

“May I?” Hannibal gestures to the dismantled corpse. And to Zeller’s doubtful expression - “Before I transferred to psychiatry, I did time as an emergency surgeon at John Hopkins.”

“...Be my guest,” Zeller offers, though nothing in his posture relaxes until Hannibal has unbuttoned and rolled up his sleeves, and Price has passed Hannibal the box of nitrile gloves for Hannibal to don a pair of the accessory *du jour*.

Price continues to hover at Hannibal’s elbow even after Hannibal has the gloves on, the very image of amiable nosiness as he blatantly studies the way Hannibal studies Jack Landry’s body. Sizing up Crawford’s newest choice in consultants even as he can’t resist the tease: “Clever fingers *and* a clever tongue. Bet you’ve always been a hit with your patients, doctor.”

Hannibal returns the humour in kind, “I’ve always prided myself on my exemplary bedside manner,” allowing himself the rare flicker of a grin when Price chuckles, visibly relaxing.

Some of that exemplary bedside manner comes in useful when Hannibal leans in closer to both the corpse in front of and - consequentially - Brian Zeller just across the drawer from him, trying to drown out the scent of one with the other - and *not* the usual way around his companions might expect. The smell of chilled, decomposing meat is more familiar - and more palatable - to Hannibal’s nose than the thick, synthetic cloud of ‘marine’-scented cologne Zeller must have sprayed on himself that morning: the fragrance is *painfully* artificial in its entirety, the type male betas unwilling to splash out on anything new past pubescence

prefer. One small step up from buying Axe, and an even smaller step up from the dreaded Old Spice which Will douses himself in if left unattended.

…In truth, Zeller might actually have fared *better* by sticking to Old Spice. Hannibal can detect mild traces of juniper from the clothing hanging over Zeller's wrists, the fabric rubbing against its wearer's glands there and soaking up the oils of Zeller's natural scent. Juniper, spicy and woody, and juniper berries a little too sharp when adulterated by a synthetic sea breeze. The animalic notes of black musk, black pepper, cedar and cumin - all of which may have been complemented by Old Spice's chypre notes, nutmeg, cinnamon and star anise.

As it is… Brian Zeller smells like the blue chemical bleach some waterfront hotels in the Inner Harbour area like to use to clean their toilet bowls.

Hannibal lets his palm hover over a chunk of the former Jack Landry's calf: a neatly portioned shank cut. "Here's the issue. This piece is back-to-front and upside-down. The tibia and fibula are roughly aligned where they should be, but it will always look strange due to the incorrect placement. If we simply turn this -"

Hannibal waits, momentarily, for either of the men with him to voice some kind of protest about him touching the corpse. When none is forthcoming, he lifts, turns and replaces the problematic section of Landry's calf himself.

Price *ooo*s in obliging wonderment. "The leg bone's connected to the knee bone." At last.

"Thanks," says Zeller, trying not to frown too hard down at the body parts in his keeping. Humble, but grudging. "That's been bothering me for some time."

Hannibal steps back from the mortuary tray, removing his gloves with the ease of one who had spent too many years as a surgeon. "I'm happy I could be of assistance. Sometimes the longer we stare at a puzzle, the harder it becomes to solve. We all require a fresh pair of eyes upon occasion."

"If we didn't, you'd be out of work as a consultant." Jack Crawford is in a pleasant mood as he enters the lab with a yawning Beverly Katz on his heels, not yet beaten down by all the horrors he must encounter in the course of his working day. He smiles in good humour as he strides forward and offers Hannibal his hand, inviting Hannibal into the gentle joke. "Dr. Lecter."

"Agent Crawford," Hannibal replies, as warmly in kind - entirely ignoring the hissed argument *("I agree with you. You* know *I agree with you. But we've still gotta* say *it."*) going on behind him.

Hannibal had always been something of an early riser, but Jack's tired phonecall to Hannibal's home - barely a few hours ago now - had connected when even *Hannibal* had still been rubbing the traces of sleep from his eyes. Apologies had come first - *please forgive the hour, Dr. Lecter, but I know you're a busy man and I wanted to catch you before you began your day* -, explanations second: Jack has asked Alana to consult on the case with the family killings, and Alana had recommended Jack ask Hannibal to consult as well. Jack is taking the

esteemed Dr. Bloom up on her advice, so would it be possible for Hannibal to visit Quantico that morning?

Not one to decline another look at the FBI's inner workings, Hannibal had accepted the offer to consult - though not before warning Jack that he'd be able to offer the FBI *only* his morning, and only that after rescheduling at least one appointment. Jack had confirmed he understood - and called his whole team in for an unusually early start.

The whole arrangement is both unnecessary and rather unkind to those in the room who require more hours of sleep on average per night than Hannibal. Alana Bloom is the only regular consultant in the building with a focus on family and child psychiatry, and it is quite unlikely that Hannibal will have anything significant to offer this case in particular that the BAU would not achieve, eventually, with Alana's services alone. Alana herself must know this - and so it seems likely, therefore, that Alana is gently abusing her influence on Jack Crawford so that she can corner Hannibal somewhere he cannot easily avoid her.

Meaning she wishes to *discuss* something she believes Hannibal does not.

Hannibal had noted her expression when she had laid eyes on all of Abigail's shopping bags at the hospital on Saturday. Wary of the still-dozy Abigail beside them, Alana had held her tongue at the time, though the heated look she had shot Hannibal as she had led Abigail to the car back to Port Haven had been a clear *we'll discuss this later.*

The weekend passed, the day is Wednesday, and later, it seems, will very shortly be *now.*

The mortuary drawer containing the remains of Jack Landry is slid closed again, and Hannibal is presented with the case file on the family killer. Killer*s.* The Lost Boys, as the FBI has coined them, firmly ignoring the name Freddie Lounds is running on *Tattlecrime*. And the photographs of their latest crime scene.

A grand parlour bedecked to be Christmas card picturesque. A tall baubled Christmas tree stretching up high to the double-height ceiling above, every lintel and mantelpiece hung with heavy garlands of greenery. Festive cards pinned up everywhere, and the wide sun-filled windows all frosted with artificial snow.

Four bodies - two adults, two children - as set pieces around the tree, all in their slippers, dressing gowns and nightwear, clearly dead for some time. Killed by gunshot wounds to the head. The Frists: alpha and omega parents, and two of their children, both under the age of 10.

A fifth body - another child - discovered in the living room's fireplace, shot in the head and then burnt, charred into something almost unrecognisable. Identity currently unknown.

"We think they were killed right after the winter break started," says Katz, grim. Tired or not, she'd spared the time to apply cosmetics before coming in, hiding the bags under her half-red eyes with concealer cream and smoky eyeshadow. "No school to report the children missing."

And yet, in the crime scene photographs, there is shredded wrapping paper - the hallmark of Christmas morning - strewn all over the parlour floor. The house was raided for all its hidden

presents by the killers, the gifts opened days ahead of time.

So many of the presents seem to be missing.

“Christmas came early, it appears,” says Hannibal. Had the Frist children lived long enough to open even *one* of their own gifts?

“Except Santa was late,” says Price, “and the Krampus showed up instead.”

A rather interesting display of cultural and folkloric knowledge. Hannibal nods.

“Not a single present under the tree for Mrs. Frist,” Katz points out, waving a paper she had taken from the case file: a list of the catalogued presents that had been discovered on-scene. There’s a rumble of discontent at the back of her throat: likely, Ms. Katz had been raised in a household with an omega mother and had been taught utmost devotional respect for them. “Who doesn’t buy their mom a Christmas present?”

“She was deemed undeserving of them,” says Hannibal. The mother is made to watch the rest of their family die in front of them. The mother must suffer, thus there must be some reason in the killer’s mind that the mother is *made* to suffer. “They were taken from her, a symbol of everything she represented.”

“Motherhood,” Will murmurs from a twilit corner of Hannibal’s mind, the omega standing only a breath behind Hannibal’s closed eyes, both hands spread protectively over his own abdomen. The midnight fields of Wolf Trap spread all around Will in a sea of rustling grass, the hem of Will’s hospital gown disappearing into the growth swaying around his thighs. “A *perversion of motherhood*, you called it.”

“And then they took her life.” *Zeller,* an unwitting interloper on the porch of Will’s home.

Will smiles over at him, the tips of his fangs glinting, and then back at Hannibal. His pupils are like endless pools of ink once more, dark mirrors gilded thinly with glowing cat’s eye gold. “Rebirth by unbirthing. She took a childhood from her child, all he had known, so her child took all she knew from *her*.”

Hannibal blinks the confused vision away, breathing out the scent of Wolf’s Traps woods and in, taking in the scents of the Quantico morgue once more. *Associations come quickly.*

“Mr. Frist and the children killed first…” Jack muses, mulling over one of the photographs from the case file, “Mrs. Frist saved for last. Same as the Turners.”

“Not exactly the same,” says Hannibal.

“The boys didn’t stay this time,” Katz agrees, and looks meaningfully over to one of the smaller covered bodies laying out on a mortuary slab not far from them all. “Something went wrong.”

The burnt child in the fireplace.

Brian Zeller has some idea of what that *something* might be. With assistance from Katz, the beta man directs them over to one of the larger bodies - to Mrs. Frist's corpse as it turns out when they peel back the sheet that covers her face. Just below her hairline, a dark, puckered entry wound stands out against her pale dead skin.

"Shooting her once wasn't enough," says Zeller, demonstrating both a gunshot and its trajectory into the corpse underneath his hands with his fingers. "The first bullet travels beneath her scalp to its final resting spot at the base of her neck."

Jack, grimly: "And it still didn't kill her."

"It did not," Zeller confirms, using his gloved hands to part Mrs. Frist's hair above the entry wound, revealing dried, matted blood.

Katz purses her lips. "...Hydrostatic shock of shell hitting skull would've caused brain damage."

Of a particularly nasty kind. "Her body would have gone into convulsions," says Hannibal.

Zeller turns Mrs. Frist's head gently to the side, revealing another entry wound there - larger than the initial one. "He shot her again. Put her out of her misery, different gun."

"Larger calibre," notes Katz, and allows another of her colleagues to arrive at the logical conclusion.

Price. "Someone *else* shot Connor's mom the second time."

"So who is our additional corpse in the fireplace?" asks Jack.

Katz turns to the body in question, carefully peeling the covering sheet back from the burnt child's face. The skin exposed from beneath the cloth is seared black and red, the victim's clothes and hair incinerated with only ashes clinging to the curve of their head.

Even through the charring, the bullet wound to the side of the corpse's head is evident: a crater in such a small skull. A shot from the larger calibre gun again. Fired up close.

"...I believe Connor Frist," Hannibal says slowly, letting his eyes rove slowly over the burnt, exposed face of the child's corpse in front of him. Dead, at least, before they went in the fire. "The boy would have descended into panic upon seeing his mother's convulsions. He had been prepared to shoot his mother, likely built himself up to it with the support of his new peers, but not to watch her suffer."

The theory makes sense to Jack. "Connor couldn't put his panic back in the bottle. So he was shot too."

"In anger," says Hannibal. "By the different gun with the larger calibre. A gun that wasn't used at the Turner house where everything went as planned."

Katz stills for a moment as she spots something on the body, reaching forwards to pluck something up from the skull: a charred feather, it seems, as she holds it aloft. "Goose down.

There was a pillow under his head."

The idea seems to puzzle Jack. "Connor Frist is murdered because he can't bring himself to finish off his mother, but afterwards he's treated with compassion and given a ceremonial send-off to the hereafter?"

"Laid tenderly to rest on a fine pillow," says Hannibal. A gesture in memory of what had come before. "Who amongst us has not lashed out impulsively against one we love, only to regret the rush of rash anger when our clearer minds return to us?"

"You think they regretted killing Connor?"

Hannibal *hm*s. "...Not the act, but finding it necessary to perform the act. Connor Frist was not ejected from his new family because he failed to kill his mother with his first shot. Connor Frist was ejected from the group because, in the face of Mrs. Frist's suffering, he was too affected to fire a second."

"...He still loved his mother," Katz says softly.

"And was therefore deemed unworthy. Not committed enough to the new family unit. And yet…"

And yet. The pillow stuffed with goose down. The body posed as though lain down to sleep. The cremation.

"Humans are social and emotional creatures," says Hannibal, a paraphrase of his own work on social exclusion, "prone to nostalgia. However much they hurt us, we still mourn the loss of our rejected black sheep."

Jack sighs and nods. Turns back to his team. "We got anything on the second gun?"

"I've been running a ballistics-matching program on the two scenes," Price offers. "Got a hit."

Zeller motions them all over to the nearby computer. "The bullet that put Mrs. Frist out of her misery matches three used in a murder in Bangor, Maine a year ago. Mother of a 13 year-old boy shot to death with her own gun."

There is an amber alert out for the 13 year-old: one C.J. Lincoln, thin, dark-haired and smirking in his photograph on-screen alongside his juvenile rap sheet.

Jack has the best seat in front of the monitor, leaning in close to scowl at the words on the screen in front of him. "C.J. Lincoln disappeared six months before his mother's murder and hasn't been heard from since."

Hannibal squeezes another seat in alongside the other man, taking a look at the rap sheet himself as Katz, Zeller and Price cluster behind his back. Rubber soles shuffling on the floor - and the click of *two* pairs of heels. "He has none of the stereotypical characteristics of a sociopath or a sadist."

“No shoplifting, no malicious destruction of property, no assault and no battery.” Jack’s exasperation grows as the rap sheet continues to rhapsodise the unlikelihood of C.J. Lincoln’s guilt. “He was *kind to animals,* for God’s sake.”

“And yet,” Hannibal counters, hiding his smile as he scents the approach of sweet violets and damp grass in the lab’s stale air, something light and bitter to cut through the thickness of Jack’s alpha scent, “the firearm says we are looking at the Peter Pan to your Lost Boys. Catching wayward and neglected sons after they fall out of their strollers.”

“It takes a sophisticated level of manipulation to convince young boys to kill their families in cold blood.”

“Kindness to animals doesn’t suggest that kind of sophistication,” says Alana, making both Price and Zeller jump as neither of them had noticed her enter the lab. Katz, leaning her weight on the back of Hannibal’s chair, snorts.

Jack, whether he had heard her come in or not, handles Alana’s entrance much more elegantly, turning in his swivel chair to give the beta woman a nod in acknowledgement: *Dr. Bloom*. “He’s older, been out in the world. Could’ve picked up a few tricks.”

Alana’s face expresses her doubt, winter pale above her still-fastened coat in peacock blue. “That kind of development, in so short a time?”

“We don’t know what happened to him during that time,” Katz points out reasonably, acknowledging - by lack of reproof - Zeller’s muttered follow-up of *or who he happened* to.

Trauma is always, in some way, transformative, and puberty a powder keg of sudden hormonal shifts and developments. It’s not out of the realm of possibility to assume C.J. Lincoln may have shot his mother with her own gun and then developed enough charisma on the streets to convince other boys to do the same. Leading the vendetta against motherhood.

Jack wrangles a cork-covered case board on wheels from a nearby storeroom, sending two nearby lab staff into a flurry elsewhere on the floor to find him a map of the eastern seaboard.

Ever the gentleman, Hannibal offers his seat to Jimmy Price while they wait - who demurs gracefully and suggests Hannibal offer the seat to Dr. Bloom instead. Alana, lips pressed into a thin pink line from where she has stationed herself over by the wall, also declines, so Price takes the seat, waggling his eyebrows dramatically when Beverly settles into Jack’s vacated spot beside him.

Jack is content to ignore all of them until he has his board, his map upon it, and a tub full of brightly coloured push pins. Picking up three pins, one after the other, to twist each through the paper of the map and into the board’s cork beneath.

“Bangor, Maine. Stamford, Connecticut. And, most recently, Reston, Virginia.”

C.J. Lincoln. Jesse Turner. Connor Frist. A progression in both linear time and direction.

Price frowns at the - small - line of pins on the map, his head tilted to one side so that Hannibal can smell a brief breath of mild green and woody petitgrain from his exposed throat. “That places each of the murders approximately five hundred miles from the one before it.”

Zeller, leaning against the desk behind his two colleagues in the lab, twists his face as well. “You’re trying to attach a geographical pattern when the murders were weeks apart.”

Hannibal approaches Jack’s board from the side, studying the line of pins and fitting them into what he already knows of the case. “There are other search parameters to consider as well,” he murmurs, taking silent note of Zeller’s raised eyebrow. (No wonder Will seems so stressed when working with the rest of the team.) “Our shooters are all unpresented minors. Middle children from white, traditional, affluent families.”

“We know they’re moving south, so that means we wanna cover the border of North Carolina and Georgia,” Jack adds, leaving aside his pins for now to grab a thick black marker from the desk beside him. “We need to get files on every missing boy within 200 miles of North Carolina.” He circles the area on the map: a large swathe of real, three-dimensional space nestled within the wonky two-dimensional black line.

(Hopefully no-one wants the map back from the head of the BAU.)

“There’s *hundreds* of towns in that area,” Zeller objects, obviously exasperated by the monumental quest his superior has put to them. “Off every freeway ramp.”

Jack turns on him, brows drawing down like a thundercloud. “Got a better idea?”

“Throw darts?” Zeller wilts under Jack’s glower, slumping down onto his seat on the desk. Price reaches back behind himself to pet the other man consolingly on the thigh.

“There is another pattern we can use to filter the results,” says Hannibal. “Less to do with geography than psychology.”

Jack looks relieved to hear it, though his forehead furrows with thought. “What kind of kid does this?”

Alana, more rhetorically: “Better yet, what kind of kid *follows* a kid who does this?”

Ms. Katz seizes upon an answer, a soft smack sounding through the lab as her fist makes contact with the open palm of her other hand. “The shepherd and his flock.”

An *ohh* from Price. “When a sheep ran away, the shepherd would sometimes break its leg to keep it from running away again. It forced the sheep to rely on the shepherd.”

“Cruel to be kind.”

“Animals remember the voice of a trusted, familiar person,” says Alana. Pauses, before adding: “They also remember people who inflict abuse on them.”

Jack shakes his head. “There’s no indication that these kids came from abusive families.”

“No. No - it’s capture-bonding.”

Hannibal looks over at Alana approvingly, elaborating her theory for the room when her shoulders go silently, stiffly, back. Still vibrating displeasure at Hannibal. “A passive, psychological response to a new master has been an essential survival tool for over a million years. If you bond with your captor, you survive. If you don’t…”

“Some of these boys could be terrified out of their minds, Jack,” Alana blurts out, clearly deciding to put the greater good over her own grievances for the moment. Both her tone and attitude soften when she looks away from Hannibal, making her impassioned plea directly to Jack. “Lost boys in more ways than one, desperately following the only light left in front of them. No matter where it leads.” *Think of the children.*

There is little else that Hannibal can assist the FBI with until Jack’s team have found the files of the missing children to filter through, so he politely takes his leave after Jack just-as-politely asks Drs. Lecter and Bloom to return the same time the following morning (when the files should be ready for them). Both Hannibal and Alana agree, and Hannibal steps out into the hallway outside the lab to make a phonecall to Will. Setting the thick briefcase he had brought with him that day down by his feet.

Will’s tired and grumpy *what?* swiftly segues into a softer *good morning* when he realises it’s Hannibal on the other end of the line, but his gentle pleasure also fades when Hannibal informs him that he, Hannibal, will only be able to visit Noble Hills quite late that evening. Hannibal’s appointments with his own patients will be running later that day due to Jack roping Hannibal into helping with the latest case at Quantico.

“The Lost Boys?” Will asks him - a blatant distraction from his own disappointment at having to eat the hospital-provided lunch and dinner that day rather than Hannibal’s cooking.

“Freddie Lounds has coined these young killers the Blood Brothers.”

“About the level of tacky I’d expect from her,” Will says, and Hannibal breathes an answering laugh back down the phone. Should Will decide the FBI is no longer for him, he would make a stellar but *ruthless* editor. “Those boys… they don’t even realise yet what they’ve given away.”

“Family.”

“Yes.” Quiet, for a moment. The soft sound of Will breathing. “I wonder if it sinks in the last time their mother looks them in the eyes, or if steals across them in the darkness later.”

“The night an echo chamber of their shock rather than the comforting blanket they had hoped for,” says Hannibal.

Will hums a rough, low note, his vocal chords a little thick with tiredness - it *is* still quite early, after all. Hannibal can see the marks the pillow’s creases have left on Will’s cheeks and forehead in his Mind Palace, the fleck of Will’s breakfast omelette or oatmeal caught at the corner of Will’s red and ever-chewed lips.

Still in his mind's eye, Hannibal reaches out to thumb that crumb of missed breakfast away. "There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in. Not all of us require hindsight to recognise that moment."

Will hears all the words that Hannibal doesn't say: the inclusion of *both* of them in the latter, more exclusive, group. "It's not always as bitter as the boys Jack has you hunting down will have it."

We don't always inflict that moment upon ourselves, Will doesn't say - but then, to have it inflicted *upon* you can be just as painful.

"How bitter was the threshold into your adulthood?" Hannibal asks him. He hasn't forgotten Donald's snide comments about Will presenting as an omega at a bitching party, and wonders whether Will classifies *that* as his embarkment into adult life.

"Are you asking if I was caught holding the smoking gun?"

"The guilt of adolescence, if nothing else."

"Growing older and growing apart." Will sighs, a long exhale that sends a rush of crackling static straight into Hannibal's ear. Another brick in the wall blocking out the world beyond the two of them, Hannibal's feet in the basement at Quantico and his mind, his eyes, his ears, all with Will in Baltimore. "Reckon my old man would've agreed there's some truth to that, but he was of the opinion that I was *born* old."

"Wise beyond your years." Hannibal closes his eyes for a moment, recalling the photograph of the cherubic baby in the omega collar's locket that he had purloined from Will's home. Those big blue eyes… nothing had escaped Will, even as an infant. He had felt all the world's hurts from very young. "You must have been a delight, a disconcertment, and a confoundment to everyone who met you."

Will snorts. Drawling, "Now that's the real *flattering* way of putting it. Logic dictates that, as I was once a child, I must've had a child*hood,* but I'll be damned if I could tell you where it ended and true adulthood began."

"Many alphas and omegas separate the two around their presentation."

"Yeah, miss me with *that* bullshit," Will scoffs. "I wasn't born an alpha, so everyone *knew* I was going to be an omega. It's alphas and omegas all the way back on my dad's side of things, and what little I gleaned about my mom says she was the same."

"You're pureblood," Hannibal realises, a little startled by the revelation - and then condemnatory of his own surprise. Despite his assertions to Bedelia that he was going to try and stop making assumptions when it came to Will Graham lest he be bitten by their consequences again, it appears Hannibal had made some mental assumptions about Will's genealogy regardless. Namely, that a poor boy raised hanging around the boatyards of the American South wouldn't know the history of the dynamics in his family tree, and that those dynamics *certainly* wouldn't be highly coveted alpha-omega couplings all the way back to their roots.

Provided their mate matches them in breeding, the children of those with a pure alpha-omega lineage will always be alphas or omegas. *That* kind of biological certainty makes pureblood individuals highly attractive mates the world over, because enough pregnancies will *always* guarantee prospective parents both a smattering of omegas to sell off and a much-desired alpha heir.

“The very purest white trash,” Will confirms, before yawning widely enough down the phone that Hannibal hears his jaw crack. *A diamond in the rough, indeed.* “My presentation was more of an inconvenient afterthought than a milestone. I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

Something Hannibal hadn’t even realised had been tightly wound inside himself loosens in relief, unspools into warmth, at the sound of Will’s nonchalance about his presentation. It’s hardly the usual attitude of a survivor of sexual assault, so clearly there must be *some* pertinent facts that Donald had deliberately omitted about the bitching party that had caused - or simply been the background to - Will presenting as an omega.

“I would be happy to hear it,” Hannibal murmurs, turning slightly when he hears the *click-click* of a familiar pair of heels. Alana Bloom, exiting the lab at last. She looks over at him meaningfully, already approaching. “We could compare notes.”

Will chuckles. “Oh, because you had it *so bad,* beta-boy.”

“I faked presenting as an alpha for three months to get out of doing certain chores,” says Hannibal, and smiles when Will’s chuckling turns into a deeper, rough bark of laughter. (Hannibal had, in fact, faked presenting as an alpha for more reasons than getting out of chores: he had needed the very neat alibi that a period of rut granted him on more than one occasion, and a few of the alpha boys in his orphanage had required a little more trickery than others to smash down to size. The false cloak of alphahood had helped with all of it.)

One of Will’s nursing team arrives in the background on the Baltimore end of the conversation, so Hannibal lets Will go. Hanging up just as the scent of violets-and-anise perfume enters into his personal space, bitter green notes damp with rain.

Alana, half a metre away, smiles when she sees (*assumes*) she has Hannibal’s full attention at last, a strained little quirk to her lips as the expression fails to reach her eyes. “Was that Will?”

She doesn’t need to ask. Will’s voice had been loud enough on the phone to spread out into the hallway, his voice recognisable to a friend’s ear even if his exact words couldn’t be made out from afar.

Hannibal cocks his head, considering the beta woman in front of him anew. The way Alana stands with both hands and arms held deliberately loose at her sides, the tips of her shoes pointed in an open *V* in Hannibal’s direction.

It seems as though the esteemed Dr. Bloom has decided, in the short time since they were both together with the team in the lab, that the gentle approach might work best with Hannibal. In contrast to all her earlier closed-off frost, Alana’s body language is now a studied projection of amicable openness, a friendly stance designed to encourage

conversational partners to be just as amicable, just as open, with her. *You can trust me. I have nothing to hide. Meet me halfway.*

If only she had managed to correctly school her expression, it would be emotional manipulation at its most subtle, easiest, and finest - but *alas,* Alana had always had trouble using psychological tactics on those she considers *friends.* In particular, on those friends of hers that are just as schooled in - if not better at - those tactics as she herself is.

Kudos, however, to Alana for the attempt.

"...It was," Hannibal eventually confirms, keeping his voice deliberately neutral. Willing to go along with whatever tone his former mentée wishes to take in this conversation insofar as it remains to his benefit. It suits Hannibal that Alana Bloom considers herself to have some influence over his decision-making for now, that she believes him coercible with enough emotional push from her hand.

Alana tacks her smile a little higher, reaching up to brush a strand of loose hair away from her face. "How is he?" *Again*, she could very easily text, call or visit Will to find out for herself.

"Some of his symptoms have worsened, and he has recently started a course of anti-seizure medication." Hannibal intentionally gives Alana the most worrisome of all details about Will's current state: a small and petty revenge for her behaviour. Waiting until the alarm flashes in her eyes before adding: "His attitude, however, remains relatively unchanged."

Alana relaxes again. "A little grumpy about everything?" She's very clearly aiming for teasing camaraderie with her tone - though the attempt falls flat as her attention has quickly diverted away from Will again. Right now, Will is not her concern.

Hannibal's lips thin, sliding a hand into one of his pockets. Purposefully closing off his own body language to indicate his disapproval.

Alana catches it immediately and her false smile fades, too wearisome for her to continue to maintain. She cuts to the chase. "We need to talk about your trip to the hospital with Abigail the other day."

"Do we?" Hannibal inquires, affecting an air of genial - if cool - bemusement.

"Hannibal. The cooking lessons? The self-defence classes? All those bags from the yarn store? This is becoming a pattern."

Certainly: a purposefully showy pattern of care. Abigail is swiftly learning to associate Hannibal with personal contentment, her every need - and not a few of her whims - provided for.

"Dr. Bloom," Hannibal queries, infusing his voice with a splash of warm, paternal humour, "are you pathologising me?" Alana is not the only one that can hearken back to the long relationship between the two of them, and it isn't difficult for Hannibal to lean on the

memory of those days when he was Alana Bloom's trusted mentor rather than her colleague and - assumed - equal. Her elder and wiser.

With all credit due to her, Alana draws on all the steel in her spine and refuses to be distracted or made young and small. It would be admirable if only it weren't so inconvenient. "How many gifts have you given Abigail recently?" Alana presses on when Hannibal doesn't immediately answer her: "How many *more* are you planning to give her?"

"'Tis the season," Hannibal flippantly responds, still trying to keep things light between them - but Alana, it seems, is doggedly determined to make things unpleasant this morning, letting loose an angry little snort. Hannibal frowns, allowing his warm tone to sink into something still familial but now reproachful. "Alana."

Unspoken: *Alana, really? You'd begrudge a young orphan girl presents at* Christmas? *How very cold.*

Alana shakes her head, casting off the unvoiced allegations like the flyaway strands of hair that detach from the collar of her coat. "Hannibal, you *know* how impressionable Abigail is, and what a vulnerable situation she's currently in in regards to her personal finances. Throwing your money at her like you've been doing, however kindly it's meant, is irresponsible."

"I fail to see how," Hannibal argues. "Many of the gifts I have given to Abigail have been to the aim of meeting a young woman's basic - including therapeutic - needs and preparing her for independent life. Give a man a fish -"

Alana cuts him short, uncharacteristically rude - and *sharp* with it. "It seems like you're trying to buy Abigail's affection with a lot more than just *fish,* Hannibal. What's next - a pony?"

Rude, Dr. Bloom. Hannibal allows some of his own annoyance to bleed out into his speech, meeting Alana's fire with his own dry, freezing chill. "Naturally. I'll let it graze next to the pink castle stocked with diamond tiaras and princess ballgowns."

Pricked by his ice so unusually pointed in her direction, Alana deflates somewhat. Picks a different tack and tries again. "...Abigail has mentioned the desire to attend an online academy she's found, starting next term. It's based in Minnesota, and it accepts nearly all of the course credits she gained in her former high school."

Satisfaction thaws some of Hannibal's frost: Abigail had followed his advice. "Surely that's a good thing?"

Surely that is *many* good things - Abigail planning for her future, seeking to finish her education, and the whole process being as smooth as possible for her -, though Alana fails to sound pleased about them. More defeated than anything else. "Generally, I'm all for people getting an education, but. She wants to take Psychology and Art in World Cultures, with a focus on the Renaissance."

Interesting. “The Baltimore Museum of Art has many pieces that should help her with her research, and D.C is not so far away as to make a field trip to the museums and galleries there an arduous task.”

Alana’s mouth twists, frustrated at Hannibal playing dumb. “Abigail never professed an interest in either Renaissance art *or* Psychology prior to conversations with *you*, Hannibal.”

Abigail hasn’t mentioned her hopes of working for the FBI to Alana then.

“To my recollection,” Hannibal says pointedly, “Abigail professed an interest in very *little* when she first came around from her coma. This was something we were interested in helping her overcome, was it not?”

“Is she really overcoming *anything* if, going forward, she shapes her future around *your* interests?” Alana *just* manages to land on the politer side of *scathing.* “She did the same thing with her father - and *I warned you* about substituting yourself into Garret Jacob Hobbs’ former place.”

Because of *course* Abigail could never organically develop an interest in topics she might have been exposed to in detail for the first time in her life, nor could she feel at liberty to explore topics she may have always been interested in but was too afraid to explore before in case they made her father feel threatened.

The argument is suppositional - but as *equally* suppositional as Alana’s.

Hannibal purses his lips. “Alana, you seem determined to toss the baby out with the bathwater.”

Garret Jacob Hobbs undoubtedly failed his daughter in more ways than one, but pushing Abigail firmly away from *everything* her father taught would be a grievous mistake. If nothing else, he had taught her how to survive him.

Alana exhales loudly through her nose, drawing up her chin. If she were an omega, her claws would be out. “Hannibal, I respect and admire you both as a friend and as a colleague, but I can’t help but feel that you’re exerting an undue amount of influence on Abigail. Unintentionally moulding her into something she wouldn’t be if left to grow and develop in peace.”

It is quite intentional, but it is also hardly fair to lay all the blame at Hannibal’s door. He demurs, “It is impossible to exist free of all influence, Alana, and I fear to wholly withdraw at this point may do Abigail more harm than good.” Abigail could have chosen a *far* worse role model for herself. “As vital parts of her support network, we can only offer her our advice and as much opportunity as we can muster for her to develop and grow. Ultimately, it is up to *Abigail* the life she chooses to lead.”

There is a great deal more Alana could say to that. She could be furious that Hannibal has *made* himself vital to her patient, call the friendship that Hannibal has developed with Abigail inappropriate, or continue on the same path of - quite correctly - accusing Hannibal

of deliberately trying to influence the decisions Abigail makes using abundant gifts and emotional manipulation.

"No more cooking lessons," Alana snaps instead, whirling around in a dramatic peacock-blue flare of her coat and stalking off to the elevator.

Beverly Katz exits the lab just in time to witness the good doctor sweeping imperiously past her, Alana still quite noticeably aggrieved. Taking one look at Alana's stiff back and another at Hannibal's carefully-applied expression of rueful woe, Katz opts quickly for what she must deem the safer option, sidling down the corridor in Hannibal's direction and waiting for Alana Bloom to disappear from their sight.

"Should I ask?"

Hannibal gives the alpha woman who has now settled cheerfully beside him the side-eye. Beverly Katz's scent is amused rather than concerned, sweet despite the hour with vanilla and pink pepper over a base of unmistakable - and building - musk. Pre-rut. Her true rut can only be a few days away now.

"It would probably be best if you did not," Hannibal warns her lightly. "For your own sake."

"Yeah." His new companion grins, her fangs gleaming with a laugh she doesn't quite let out into the air. "It's rare to see Dr. Bloom cross, and I'd rather not have that directed at *me*." She elbows Hannibal *carefully,* telegraphing the movement so that he can move away from the gentle impact if he would rather not get a pointed dig to the side. "Good luck?"

Hannibal appreciates the consideration, and returns the favour in kind by sighing dramatically for Ms. Katz's entertainment. Katz chuckles - and then her stomach growls. Loudly. She must be burning through a lot of calories due to her pre-rut.

"If I may ask an indelicate question?" Hannibal's query is met with a friendly, open expression: *go for it.* "Your rut must be relatively close - a few days away at most." Katz looks a little startled, so Hannibal gestures to her eyes - the irises are quite thick with red, and the alpha has heavily darkened her lashes with mascara. Preening behaviour.

Katz sighs. "Suppose there's no hiding some things from a former surgeon."

There isn't - not from the observant ones anyway. "The majority of alphas take time off work in the days leading up to their rut," says Hannibal. "Many express that they find it increasingly difficult to concentrate at work during that period, especially if they work in a particularly emotive or volatile environment."

Katz gives Hannibal a rueful grin, predicting the question that he's so obviously circling. "So why am I still here?" He nods. "Pre-rut makes me antsy if I'm not doing something useful. Being here, helping to protect people - or at least, stop other people from doing more harm - is about as useful as I can get, I think. Jack needs the best of the best on his team, and, lucky for me, I'm one of the best. I'll work for him as long as I'm able, and take off when I'm more hindrance than help." Katz flexes one - not unimpressive, even under her lab coat - arm, playfully shameless. "Good awareness of my own limits."

“An admirable trait.” Hannibal’s compliment is sincere. Will has found a staunch and *wise* friend in Ms. Beverly Katz, and it seems it might be best for Hannibal to cultivate a closer relationship with the woman as well. Something made much easier for him when Katz’s stomach growls audibly once more. “Though it seems you find yourself betrayed by certain biological tells. Hungry?”

Bravado fades into sheepishness, Katz’s hand placed mournfully across her tell-tale stomach. “*Starving.* Mowed my way through the snacks I brought today already, so I’m gonna use the short break we currently have to go grab something from the caf. Want me to get you anything before you head out?”

It’s a generous offer, but Hannibal can do better, both for himself and the woman in front of him. He had packed his own lunch for that day in his briefcase - and brought along a spare meal in the hopes of mollifying Alana in what he had known would be an inevitable confrontation. An olive branch, of sorts. An opportune moment to distract Alana had never come up, and the beta might very well *throw* the food he had brought for her at Hannibal right now, so Ms. Katz may as well reap the rewards of being in the right place at the right time.

Katz is performatively commiserate about Hannibal’s plight when he explains his reasoning - and Alana’s bad temper - to her, bright-eyed and bouncing a little too cheerfully on her toes as he reaches for his briefcase. Free delicious food - Hannibal doesn’t fault her for her lack of pity towards Alana, nor for her hasty attempts to dissuade his last-minute (idle and *entirely* insincere) suggestion that perhaps he *should* go after Dr. Bloom to give her the lunch he had made: maple and chilli pork tortilla wraps with smoky mayonnaise, made using some leftover pig Hannibal marinated overnight in chilli and maple syrup.

“The stars are not in *position* for this sacrifice,” Katz insists, nodding sagely when Hannibal lays a filled brown paper bag in her open and eager hands. “Can’t do it. Not today.”

“Entirely to your benefit.”

Katz shrugs - “That wheel of fortune, she keeps on spinning,” - tearing open the paper bag with flattering eagerness and immediately taking a large bite of the wrap within. She groans appreciatively even before she begins to furiously chew, fluttering her eyes dramatically in Hannibal’s direction until she swallows. “Doc,” fervently, “you’re gonna have the best-fed kid in *all of Baltimore*.”

Hannibal will accept no less. “I’ll do my best,” he says modestly.

“Adopt me?” Katz begs of him. Not wholly joking either. “I have plenty of siblings; my parents would probably forgive us eventually.”

“Ms. Katz -”

“Beverly.”

“Beverly,” Hannibal amends, ever gracious, “how could anyone ever forgive me for depriving them of your delightful company?”

“Charmer,” Beverly snorts at him, but cannot resist taking another - smaller bite of her wrap. The dramatic eye-fluttering resumes, and Hannibal huffs out the playful laugh expected of him in response. “I don’t even care if you’re lying through your teeth; this tastes *so good*.”

“Morals so often begin in the mind and end in the stomach,” Hannibal agrees, leaning in closer to Beverly before he allows the corners of his lips to curve upwards in a feline smile. Doesn’t add more - *and some concepts take longer to digest than others* - because Beverly is already laughing, sensing only part of his meaning and still seeing the joke.

“I owe you one,” she says, honestly grateful, waving the inherited wrap in one hand.

Hannibal nods with great solemnity - “A promise made in pork,” - and squirrels the memory of the favour owed him away for another time.

Chapter End Notes

Crépinette: (from French *crépine,* ‘pig’s caul’) a small patty/flat sausage consisting of minced meat and savoury stuffing wrapped in caul fat (intestinal membrane), not unlike a rissole. The patty is cooked on a pan or on a grill.

Jimmy sings a variation of *Dem Bones* in the morgue. The song has many, many versions, but the variation most familiar to me from my own childhood was a version (again, with many variations!) called *The Skeleton Dance.* It’s used as a party song for children, and also to teach little ones which bones connect to other bones in the human body.

There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in. - Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*

Maple and chilli pork wraps with smoky mayo

I’m sorry for the long wait (*again*), and thank you all for your patience. I’ve been holding the Bad Luck Bear when it comes to health again this year: I caught a nasty virus in December that morphed into pneumonia and hospitalisation in January, and after the long recovery from *that* I’ve been going through the medical wringer with other issues (illnesses, tests, medications, more tests, more medications, the occasional diagnosis) since. I’m a little worn thin, to say the least, but I’m still determined to keep on plodding along with this fic!

If you’re interested in a WIP guide to the worldbuilding of this universe, I now have *Méli-Mélo* for your needs. (Updates are about once a month, circumstances allowing.)

I now also have a spotify album of every piece* of music mentioned/alluded to in this fic (so far)! It’s approximately 2hr 15mins long at the moment, so gird your loins. [*Select pieces were included from *Das Wohlemperierte Klavier* rather than the whole

thing, and spotify doesn't host Elvis' version of *Lonely This Christmas*. A few tracks were included where the music is nameless in the fic, but which fit the vibes.]

brunoise

Chapter Summary

> Will uses his night hours for anything other than restful sleep. Hannibal and Alana continue lending their assistance to the BAU for the case featuring the Lost Boys.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A winter forest at night, the trees' bare branches reaching out to Will beside and below them like an aching lover. Moonlight turns the snow beneath Will's booted feet into a pristine silver sea, the falling flakes glittering like stars on Will's coat and cheeks and eyelashes. Little silver sparkles everywhere he looks, in every soft and rolling dip in the ground, in every shadow, every time Will blinks and replaces the night's serenity with the true darkness behind his eyes.

Whose woods these are Will thinks he knows. Is proven right when he stills and turns - called by a sound with no words, soft as the sound of snow on snow on snow - and sees a brief movement under a nearby tree.

Like the snow and the secret stinging kisses the snowflakes leave against Will's mouth, the black feathered stag is limned in silver as well. The beast is barely more than a swell of soft breathing midnight made visible by its outline, the feathers of its hide unruffled by any night wind, its great dark crown of antlers blending in perfectly with the branches of the trees overhead. It’s alive: Will can see the steam of the stag’s breath as it rises up into the air between the snow flurries, catching a glimpse of the living gleam of the stag's animal eyes as it moves out of a deeper shadow under its tree and closer towards Will. Beautiful as the night behind the falling snow.

The stag snorts, warm and heavy, when it sees it has Will's attention, dragging one hoof over the ground in front of it and drawing a furrow in the snow.

Approach.

Will approaches, stepping through a dream of silver and shadow. He moves carefully, respectfully, around the sharp black tines of the stag's antlers lest the animal turn its head suddenly and gore him, equally as wary should the animal rear and strike him with its powerful legs.

The stag remains still, and Will lays one of his trembling gloved hands against his summoner’s warm and moving side.

Will's nose is filled with the ozone sting of cold, the thick heavy scent of moss and earth and animal musk. Sifting his fingers into deep, inky black feathers, the feathers' oils gleam like mercury over Will's fingers, wrist and palm, absorbing - at least by sight - the leather of Will's glove into part of the stag's feathered hide. Will can barely feel the falling snow with the stag beside him to warm him through. The creature's large bulk wards off any cold, any threat posed by the night's darkness and the woods, and shields Will from both the drive of the wind and most of the falling snow.

Will feels safe there, all but tucked up against his protector's side. Honoured and cherished with the gift of touch, the peace of silence, watching the woods fill up with snow.

The snowflakes keep falling, filling in the light indents left in the snow by Will's footsteps. The marks of the stag's hooves are vanishing as well when Will glances over into the shadows - deep, dark things that they are, liquid and black. Filled with... tar?

Will drops slowly down onto his knees beside the stag, the dark hem of his coat opening around his calves like the unfolding of a raven's wings. Reaching out to touch the nearest indent behind the stag's back hoof.

Will's gloves come back dripping with darkness, thin and warm and congealing. Smelling heavily of iron when Will brings fingertips up to his nose. *Blood* . Blood, black in the moonlight, tacky as the feathers' oils.

It tastes like metal and wine and winter on his tongue.

It tastes like stomach acid and regurgitated hot chocolate coming back up over his tongue, Will staggering forwards into consciousness with the expulsion of burning liquid from his throat.

Fawn-legged and still blind with dreams he lists towards the nearest solid object - *body* - and coughs, almost inhaling his own vomit, coughing and coughing as one strong hand grips his arm, another thumping strong and sure between his shoulder blades to clear his airway. After one brief gasp of breath Will gags and vomits again - but all that comes up is a few dribbling droplets that splatter on the linoleum floor in front of him along with the sweat dripping from his forehead and tears streaming from his itching, watering eyes.

The fist thumping at Will's back softens into an open palm, rubbing firmly, pushing up the last of any acid that may be lingering in Will's lungs. A woman's voice consoling him.

"There," she says soothingly. "There, that's right, get it all out." One of his nurses. *Hillary*.

Doubled over on himself, Hillary is currently the only thing keeping Will upright. Apparently utterly unbothered by the mess Will has just made of the floor at their feet, the omega woman smiles when Will scrubs the back of his wrist over his own sleep-crusted eyes and glances up at her beside him.

"Good to have you back in the land of the living." Hillary helps Will into standing upright again, supporting his own weight - *away* from the puddle of vomit taking up a large portion

of the dim hospital hallway they're standing in. She gestures quickly to their - noticeably vomit-free - clothes. "May I compliment your aim?"

Despite himself, Will grins, and loves the woman beside him with a sudden deep and childish gratefulness. Land of the living or not, he feels like a thing half *dead* ; he aches all over, his head is pounding, and thick, sour sweat sticks his hair, his t-shirt and his pyjama bottoms to his skin. Will feels *disgusting* and slightly ashamed for having to have another person touch him so extensively when he's such a mess, and depressed because he's just too bone- *tired* for any other option to be a feasible one for fixing the situation. *His* situation. He needs the help. It sucks. But it feels *good* to be helped, especially by someone who's willing to put up with all of Will's shit by matching it with their own dry and judgement-free sense of humour.

"Sorry," Will croaks, an apology for *everything* . It's late: the corridors around them are deserted, the windows nearby have their blinds drawn down over darkness, and the dimmed overhead lights have taken on the soft droning buzz they adopt in the early hours. It's late and Hillary is going to need to call in one of the custodians - who, quite infamously, hardly like being disturbed at this time of night. Morning. Not for some sick idiot wandering in his sleep.

Hillary just pats him on the arm. Never letting go of him to do so, simply raising and dropping her fingers against his upper arm in a gentle *pat-pat.* She smells like meadow flowers and antiseptic soap. "I enjoy our night-time walks."

Bullshit. But *kind* bullshit.

"Well, I offer only the very *finest* of somnambulant strolls," Will somehow manages to drawl out past the gravel in his throat. 4 out of 5 stars on *TripAdvisor,* with mixed reviews about the tour guide turning up to work in his sweat-soaked pyjamas.

"You got quite far this time," says Hillary. She nods to the hallway around them - and the familiar, not-too-distant exit doorway at the end of the hall. "Almost out to the rooftop garden." Several floors down from Will's suite. (No wonder Will's - bare - feet hurt.) "It's a good thing I'm with you; the cameras along here never work. Forgot to fix them up when they put the garden in."

Huh. "Don't want the footage of your delusional patients stumbling off the roof?"

Hillary pats Will's arm again. "None of my colleagues - or myself - would let anyone get that far," she says firmly, and Will believes her. Certainly trusts her enough to allow himself to lean on her as she escorts him back up through the hospital floors to his ward-suite.

Will gamely takes a seat on his bed as Hillary scribbles a note about Will's sleepwalking on his chart, even though he knows sleep won't be coming back to him for a while. Hillary, looking over at him, seems to realise that as well, sighing in that motherly fashion of hers as she sets her pen down.

"I'll get you some tea, Mstr. Graham. Why don't you wash up and put on some clean PJs?"

It's not a bad idea. Will goes into his little bathroom to wash-up and change whilst Hillary goes to gently harangue whoever it is the nurses need to harangue to get food sent up from

the hospital kitchen at odd hours. A shower is beyond Will at the moment so he simply dunks his head under the cold tap at the sink to try and shock some sense back into his brain, shaking his wet curls out like a dog in the basin before he roughly rubs a towel over their tangled mess. If he rubs hard enough, he can't even feel his headache any more, and spearmint toothpaste takes care of the *death* inhabiting his mouth.

Hillary returns just as Will is padding back towards his bed again, a tray in one hand and her little wheeled blood pressure machine in the other. *Betrayal.* Will gives her wounded eyes but allows her to measure his blood pressure with the cuff anyway, sitting still so she can take his temperature and pulse for some more little scribbles on his chart.

Finally, Will gets his sticker for being a good boy. The tray Hillary had brought in with her holds a large mug of a Chinese white tea blend made using jasmine, cinnamon, and desiccated coconut and an almost-as-large sweet coconut muffin intended for patients' breakfasts - later - in the morning.

The taste of creamy coconut is gentle on Will's churning stomach, and the sweetness of the muffin and the heat of the mug between Will's two hands is steadying to his nerves. Sitting cross-legged on his mattress, Will calms bite by bite, sip by sip.

The clock on his bedside cabinet ticks over to *03:46.* Sleep still doesn't come.

Will boots up his laptop. He has more people than usual to buy Christmas presents for this year, and he's fallen a bit behind in acquiring some of them gifts. His tenured colleagues at the FBI Academy are already covered (fruit and nuts hampers for all of them except one professor in particular who has the reputation for being allergic to every type of food known to mankind and/or on a different diet every month, who Will buys a fancy potted plant). Will's neighbour who occasionally looks after his dogs is getting chocolate and a new gardening apron with gloves to match it - and the largest jar of smooth peanut butter that Will can find online to replace all the homemade peanut butter ball dog treats his greedy pack scoff at her house. The vet clinic that usually sees Will's pack should have *already* received several tins of chocolates and gingerbread to share among their staff, and the dogs themselves will all be getting new toys and treats, bones and blankets.

Flowers should arrive on Friday to the woman down in Baton Rouge - granddaughter of his grandmother's best friend - that does what's *proper* and keeps Will's grandmother's grave clean and supplied with flowers, and a few bottles are due at the weekend for one of Will's daddy's old friends closer to New Orleans: enough gutrot for the old man to pour out a drink for Will's daddy in the Mississippi where Will had scattered the greater part of his father's ashes.

Will has already sent his usual gift - a good bottle of rum and a gift set of shitty aftershave - to his surviving ex-partner from NOLA PD, and the site Will had ordered a new children's bike off of for the annual Wolf Trap toy drive for deprived children in the area had confirmed delivery two days ago.

Will had picked out a large maple and walnut cheese/charcuterie board for Alana a few days ago, and has it already wrapped and hidden away in the cabinet beside his bed. (The shaped drawer for the knives that always come with cheese boards is tucked under the walnut wood

at one end at one end of the board, and three little mice carved in maple peek their noses over the walnut on the other.) Ordering some fancy cured meats and truckles of cheese finishes the gift - and finishes the list of people Will usually buys Christmas gifts for every year.

This year - *well.* He's at Noble Hills.

Taking Will's blood one evening, Hillary had once mentioned her love of all the fancy marzipans sold at Christmastime. Will orders her a bespoke hamper filled with different flavoured teas, coffees, chocolate and as many different kinds of marzipan the online store provides. (Most of them are fruit-shaped, but there's some extremely ugly ones shaped and painted to look like pigs?)

Tancred gets an equally bespoke hamper filled with flavoured teas and treats in dedication of all their nights sitting together on the couches in Will's ward, commiserating over the state of the world and watching shitty TV.

For Carla and her eclectic tastes, Will orders a box stack of gourmet Christmas 'snacks' (handmade butter cookies, gingerbread, chocolate truffles and marshmallows shaped like snowmen) and a pair of handmade earrings (silver hooks with a dangling resin strawberry on each).

For Dr. Morgan-Moore and the nurses that Will knows less well, he orders large but more generic Christmas hampers, and the same for Dominic, his sonographer, and Dominic's assistant. Dr. Choi, who Will barely knows, will be getting a humongous box of chocolates, and Dr. Sutcliffe, who Will knows *entirely* too much, will receive the same (in the hopes the other omega will chokes on the candy).

A few more box stacks of gourmet snacks for various orderlies that bring Will food and keep his suite clean have Will's wallet groaning, but he's still not done.

Hillary brings Will another cup of white tea, and it's only when she sets the gently steaming cup down on the bed-table beside his hand that Will realises he'd even finished the first one - and the coconut muffin with it.

"You should really try and rest, if you can," the omega nurse tells Will quietly after he thanks her for the refill.

"No rest for the wicked," is Will's only - *tired* - reply, and Hillary shakes her head at him before she leaves.

Will orders Beverly a box of gingerbread and a new luxury thermos in the hopes that the alpha woman will remember to bring her own coffee to work rather than relying on the break room's swill. The watercolour-style art decorating the canister of red foxes bounding through a field of flowers after bright-eyed bluebirds reminds Will very much of Beverly - her red leather jacket, her own bright eyes and attitude -, so Will orders her the bento box that matches the thermos as well. And then, remembering that Beverly had once mentioned crocheting a blanket, a monthly subscription box for organic hand-dyed yarn for the next year. Plus some fancy chocolate studded with roasted almonds for her alpha boyfriend to munch on.

Jimmy Price, likewise, gets a *Ben & Jerrys* subscription box for half a year and a bottle of 12 year-old *Glenfiddich*. Will isn't sure if Price is even a fan of Scotch but Price *had* mentioned a love of whisky, so it's a reasonable gamble. (Single malts are easy enough to regift even if Price doesn't like them.)

Brian Zeller is an enigma. Will doesn't know what Zeller likes at all (except, perhaps, to see less of Will in the morgue), so Will just orders him a bottle of *Glenfiddich* to match Price. A box of gingerbread and one of those large and immensely fluffy blankets that are popular this year. (*Everyone* has one. Apparently. It's recommended to get one, to get plenty of blankets in case it's cold or omegas are visiting.)

For Jack… more *Glenfiddich* for Jack (Will isn't an original gift-giver), a slightly better bottle than the ones sent to Zeller and Price. New crystal whiskey glasses engraved with the pattern of a starry night over a forest of firs.

The cupboards in Will's suite are already packed tight with gifts for Abigail, so that just leaves -

Hannibal.

What do you get a man that's got everything? Will muses as he sips at his cooling tea, filling his lungs with the soothing scents of jasmine and coconut. He can finally feel his eyes beginning to droop.

There is nothing that Will can buy that Hannibal can't already buy for himself. And there's nothing Will can *make* for Hannibal while he's stuck in the hospital with no access to his toolkit or shed back in Wolf Trap - if Will even *could* make something with his encephalitis still raging and his hand-eye coordination so immensely fucked up.

A logic rooted in a hopeless kind of affection says that it doesn't matter what Will gets Hannibal; Hannibal will appreciate anything that Will gives him. They're close. They're friends. Will is *already* giving Hannibal the gift of growing his baby. Will routinely hands Hannibal a pile of shit to deal with with a sarcastic *tadaa!* and Hannibal reacts like Will has handed him half the stars in the sky instead of more trouble. Switching things up and giving Hannibal a real, *actual* present would be a marvel in and of itself, and if it's sentimental, if it's something Will has picked out solely with Hannibal in mind…

It isn't hard to imagine the way Hannibal's gaze would warm on Will's any more, to think of the melting whiskey-and-amber pool of Hannibal's eyes as tender as his mouth easing over Will's in a *very* appreciative kiss. Those leather gloves of his woven through Will's hair-

Will sets his mug down a little unsteadily behind his laptop, an embarrassed heat prickling as much up his neck as it twists low in his belly. It's all well and good imagining Hannibal's reaction to Will's Christmas present - but Will *still* doesn't know what to get the other man. And he doesn't have much time to think about it either. It's the (early) morning of the 19th; Christmas is less than a week away.

Christmas *at Hannibal's home* is less than a week away.

Will sighs and slumps back into his pillows behind him on the bed. *Fuck.*

Thursday morning is simply a variation on Wednesday. There is no early morning phonecall from Jack or young agent to escort Hannibal down to the labs when he arrives at Quantico, but the sound of Price and Zeller bickering is audible as soon as Hannibal reaches the underground level in the elevator. The two men in question keep up the running soundtrack as they pass back and forth from one lab to another, hauling boxes and files in their arms. Price spares Hannibal a cheerful *good morning!* as he passes by, but Zeller, on his colleague's heels, gives a gloomier welcome.

"*Is* it morning?" he asks Hannibal. "I was out of bed and down here before the sun."

"I keep telling you to get one of those light therapy lamps," Price says after Hannibal has confirmed the hour. "One of my nephews has SAD real bad, but it's been so much better for him since my brother got him a lamp last year."

"You want me to replace the sun with a *lamp?* " Zeller twists his face, heaving the box in his arms a little higher. "Sounds a bit dystopian."

"The modern-day work schedule *is* dystopian," Hannibal points out mildly, smiling genially when both men in front of him turn to give him looks as equally interested as they are confused. "Our ancestors once rose with the sun and rested when it grew dark. It was normal to sleep for some time, wake for a few hours to indulge in one's hobbies, eat, drink, and/or socialise, and then return to sleep until dawn. It was only the advent of electric light - and the clear, bright illumination of the darkness that it brought - that changed all of that, driving people to work longer hours and sleep in one long uninterrupted span during the night. There are many explorations into how this change has affected the mass human psyche, but most agree that the shift to working through the dark hours has a detrimental effect, especially if an individual works indoors during the hours of daylight."

"...Sounds like most of the world stuck in an office 9-to-5," Price offers, and Hannibal nods at him.

Focusing on Brian Zeller once more: "Mstr. Price is quite correct in suggesting that a light therapy lamp might be to your benefit, Mr. Zeller. Some studies have concluded their effectiveness in the short-term, especially when used first thing in the morning."

Zeller's facial features twist again - but this time into something less disturbed. Curious now. "*Huh*." Revelation looks remarkably dull on him, and Hannibal misses Will's bright spark all

the more for this poor comparison. “I'll look into it, thanks. But, uh. It's actually *Doctor*. For both of us.”

An impolite oversight on Hannibal’s part - especially towards an omega. The dynamic often have their academic titles ignored, addressed with over-familiarity in comparison to both alpha and beta peers. “My apologies,” says Hannibal, making eye contact with Price in particular.

Price just smiles at him, waving away the apology - unneeded. “Oh, it's fine. Almost everyone calls me Jimmy.”

“Dr. Lecter,” says Beverly, appearing in the doorway of the lab her two colleagues had been carrying their boxes and files towards. She smiles, shadows under her eyes but apparently still in a good mood. Scent-blockers *heavily* industrial today, sweet synthetic vanilla almost cloying when compared to her usual subtle smoke. “Thought I heard your voice out here.”

(“Where did your brother get a light therapy lamp?” Zeller hisses to Price as they hurry on past Beverly into the lab with their burdens.

“I’ll get you one for Christmas,” Price assures him.

“You haven’t *already* gotten me a Christmas present?!”)

Beverly beckons, and Hannibal follows her into the lab. The boxes Zeller and Price had been carrying are full of the files of missing and/or abducted children that loosely fit their search parameters for the Lost Boys case. Beverly and Alana - who has beaten Hannibal to Quantico this morning and is still carrying yesterday’s grudge with her - have already whittled many of the files down even further so that, as Hannibal approaches the conference table the two women are working at, there are only fifty or so files left for him to examine more closely.

Zeller and Price make themselves scarce, busy with another one of Jack’s tasks. The atmosphere is a great deal less frenetic with them gone.

Beverly has brought coffee for all of them from the basement break room. Hannibal makes a show of sipping at his cup once near the beginning of his perusal of the case files, politely refrains from grimacing, and then never touches it again.

The clock on the wall ticks. Papers shuffle. Beverly takes a deep liquid swig of her coffee, apparently - almost - immune to its taste due to overexposure. The lights and air-con hum.

After 45 minutes of quiet work, the case files on the table have been reduced from fifty to fourteen. All are opened and splayed out over the table's expanse for Hannibal, Alana and Beverly to examine them all more easily, the photographs of fourteen young faces looking silently up at the three investigators, waiting to have their secrets uncovered.

Alana brings out the case file for the Lost Boys whose names they already know - C.J. Lincoln, Jesse Turner, and Connor Frist -, laying them beside their fourteen potential matches for contrast.

Hannibal takes a step back from the conference table to take in the images of the fourteen-plus-three children as a whole - though his gaze lingers longest on the photographs of the three Lost Boys. “All three of these boys are - or were - quite small for their age. Underweight.”

Beverly frowns, looking up from the papers in her own hands. “…You’re suggesting parental neglect? Food deprivation?” Any excuse for why a good boy could turn bad.

Hannibal shakes his head. “Nothing so overt. It has always been part of human nature to exclude that which we perceive, however unconsciously, to be different from ourselves - even amongst family members. The black sheep of the family: the ‘difficult’ child. The one that doesn’t behave like their more obedient siblings, that doesn’t subscribe to the same interests and hobbies that the rest of the family share.” A natural *other*-ing, inflicted both internally and externally by the child and their family. “The exclusion can happen even if a reasonable explanation is provided for the difference.”

Quite typically, the reasonable explanation is simply neurodivergence.

“I’ve seen more than a few ‘difficult’ children as my patients,” Alana says softly. “The bad behaviour that their parents and guardians complain about is often just a natural emotional response from the child to stress and upheaval in their environment - or the symptom of an undiagnosed disorder.”

“ADHD could explain the particular similarities between the boys,” Hannibal suggests, even as Alana begins to slowly nod along with him.

“Ritalin, Focalin, any medication containing methylphenidate can affect appetite and slow long-term growth in children.” All medications frequently prescribed to children with ADHD.

Beverly sets down the papers in her hands to reach across the table for one stray page in particular. “Zee extrapolated C.J. Lincoln and Jesse Turner’s present heights and weights from their abduction stats and some of the forensic evidence we gathered at the Turner house. Unless puberty has really thrown one of them a curveball, they should both be on the shorter, lighter side.” She turns her piece of paper over to Alana - apparently the stats she's talking about. “I’ll make a note to look into their prescriptions.”

Alana inwardly sighs as she glances at the paper; Hannibal sees the exact moment as her shoulders droop. “Without the interference of a leader, these kids would never consider violent action.”

Hannibal returns to sifting through the fourteen potential case files. “Our missing child is a boy, likely but not necessarily white or white-passing, and likely but also not necessarily the son of a male alpha and female omega. No parental triads.”

Beverly frowns again. “You’re ruling out triads entirely? Why?”

Alana: “Studies have shown that children living in households containing a higher number of parental or adult familial figures receive, on average, a significantly higher portion of adult

attention, affection and guidance in their day-to-day lives than children raised in single-parent or smaller households. Even accounting for the wealth divide between households."

An *ah* from Beverly. "With more moms and dads around, the kids have more people to get attention from, I get it." She adds her own insight: "We should rule out missing children from multigenerational households as well. No grandparents at home."

"Our boy is a lonely figure in what otherwise appears to be a thriving family," says Hannibal. "An outsider who does not look like an outsider. He will likely be smaller and slighter than average, with a solo hobby that takes up his time. Likely something vocational, intellectual, inventive or mechanical, requiring precise hand-eye coordination."

Will would likely have been a perfect candidate had he been raised in the same time as their missing children. A slight, introverted and incredibly intelligent boy from a small family and in the targeted geographical area, misunderstood and over-diagnosed. A male alpha father too busy at work to notice his son's comings or goings, and a female omega mother utterly absent, sparing Will in her absence the guilt of having to remove her from his life with a bullet to the brain.

Beverly hums, occupied with the files once more. "The devil makes work for idle hands kind of thing." She's skimming the files now, tossing ones aside when they fail to match their lengthened profile. She pauses at one eventually, holding up a photo. "Here's one. Family moved from Biloxi to Charleston to Fayetteville in the last three years. He won a Junior High award for his work on pretty sophisticated computer circuitry."

Hannibal reaches over to pick up the top page from the file she's looking at. Reading aloud, "Chris O'Halloran."

"Why do you think these kids are susceptible to C.J. Lincoln?" Alana asks the room. She's still stubbornly refusing to make eye contact with Hannibal, a fierce thing today in alpha colours: red blouse and black skirt.

Hannibal answers her anyway. "Our boy may have a brother, but their ages or interests keep them apart. So he's a brother without a brother."

"Brothers looking for a mother," says Alana. And then frowns when both Hannibal and Beverly give her startled looks, apparently failing to understand their surprise at her comment. Like it's obvious: "They're killing the mothers last."

...She's right. Alana is right. The boys are killing their mothers because their mothers failed to live up to expectations, so naturally they must be looking for - or have already *found* - a replacement.

"It's Wendy and the Lost Boys," Beverly says, her dismay burning easily through her scent-blockers with the extra sweat caused by pre-rut. It tastes and smells like something burnt and acrid, like the unhappiness etching itself around Beverly's mouth and eyes even with the jubilation of *revelation* upon them all. "Or the Lost Boys and a particularly vengeful Tinker Bell."

What is the nature of the mother figure who has integrated themselves - likely *her* self, based upon the targeted boys having female omega mothers - into the lives of their Lost Boys? Who is guiding these children to kill?

In the Heavens above, The angels, whispering to one another,/ Can find, among their burning terms of love,/ None so devotional as that of 'Mother.'

"'What does the god of your childhood look like?'" Hannibal asks solemnly, the quote rising in a gentle, reverent murmur to his lips. "'A soft apparition pigeoned in the attic,/ a wound eating you one year at a time?'"

Beverly shivers.

Hannibal lets the new knowledge they have discovered turn slowly in his mind, examining the new facts and their potential ramifications from every angle. This case is already having a profound effect on Will. Adding the knowledge that a mother figure is guiding these boys, has essentially *adopted* them to actively turn them against their biological families and guide them to kill, will likely affect him even *more*.

It should be fascinating to watch.

Hannibal, Beverly and Alana take Chris O'Halloran's file to Zeller and Price to investigate further, and the early results alone send Hannibal and Alana up to Jack's office half an hour later.

Jack looks up from the computer at his desk as the two enter his space, expectant.

Hannibal doesn't keep him waiting. "C.J. Lincoln is not the only leader amongst our Lost Boys, Jack. There's an adult with some formative sway in the group. Very likely to be a beta or omega woman due to the families the boys have come from, though it could be an omega man. A mother figure. They're looking to form a family."

Jack takes the news grimly but well. "Family can have a contagion effect on some people. Influences them to adopt similar behaviours and attitudes."

He's right; one need only look at Will to see the truth of it.

"This 'mother'…" Alana says tentatively, "whoever they are, Jack, they want these children to... *burst* with love for them. But the boys' old families have to be erased for them to achieve that."

Jack sets his elbows on his desk, folding his fingers together as he thinks. "So this mother figure abducts them, convinces them no-one can love them as much as they do, and then makes damn sure of it."

Hannibal nods. "Bring your new family home to wipe out the old, or be dispatched from the group like Connor Frist."

Alana hands Jack the file on Chris O'Halloran. "A security camera in a convenience store in Alexandria, Virginia, caught footage of one Chris O'Halloran this morning. He was with an

unidentified woman."

Jack opens it immediately, skimming the first page. "Where's this kid's parents?"

Hannibal answers him. "Fayetteville, North Carolina."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's about a week and a half overdue, but I decided I loathed what I'd written and rewrote it all. And then tried to rewrite it *again* before I realised I was letting perfect be the enemy of good. Then I had to split it because the new chapter was getting stupidly long… Sometimes half of writing is just yelling at the fic doc.

Brunoise: (from 'Brunoy') 1, a very fine dice. A method of cutting vegetables, usually to the dimensions of 2mm or less, by julienning and then cutting many times at a 90-degree angle to the julienne. 2, a mixture of leeks, celery, carrots and sometimes turnips chopped in this way (similar to a *mirepoix* or what is known as *the Holy Family* in Cajun cuisine).
This cut was reputedly popularised in the 'Brunoy Commune', which was 19km (12 miles) southeast of Paris before Paris grew. Thus its name, *brunoise*, from 'Brunoy.'

Whose woods these are I think I know./ His house is in the village though;/ He will not see me stopping here/ To watch his woods fill up with snow. - Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*
Because I feel that, in the Heavens above,/ The angels, whispering to one another,/ Can find, among their burning terms of love,/ None so devotional as that of "Mother," - Edgar Allan Poe, *To My Mother*
What does the god of your childhood look like?/ A soft apparition pigeoned in the attic,/ a wound eating you one year at a time? - Rachel McKibbens, *outhouse*

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